

Sefer
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Sefer

2013

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The word *sefer* translates from Hebrew as “work of writing” or “book.”

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Congratulations to this year's
cover art contest winner, Monique Gaboriau.
Her piece is titled "Hair."

Poetry



“Sin” by Monique Gaboriau

Broken Love

Kevin Powers

My white petals-frail,
beat to dust
and from the palm of your hand,
you blew them into the wind.

Rainstorm

Sarah Wallace

The rain that falls on my window pane, reminds me with every splash:
Doubt-drip-despair-drop.
Our morals flow like muddied waters through drains—
Gutters deep.

A well somewhere keeps the mess—stagnant, muddled—digress
Digress—dreams wet.
Downpour, awash—arrests my soul,
This coal to purify filth to streams.

A renaissance to faith— re-awake my soul,
All that falls does not sink.
Reverberate within puddles shallow,
The ripples fill the soul with sweet.

Remembrance and how life should be—
Drip-stay-drop they go.
My pane is covered once more,
Rushing to my door.

This time awash, my fears no more,
Grace precipitates—soaking pores deep.
Shallow states deepen to wells—
Of faith and freedom and felicity-once again.

There's A Whisper In The Wind

Logan Crowder

There's a whisper in the wind
That tells of hidden lands
Fills the Heart, steals the Soul
And heeds

There's a whisper in the wind
That tells of forgotten lands
Wills the Heart, feels the Soul
And pleads

There's a whisper in the wind
That tells of dying lands
Kills the Heart, seals the Soul
And bleeds

On The Death of a Thistle

Angela Shuler

Wait.

I am down here.

The insignificant architecture,
Surrounded by the man-made earth.

Because I am invisible,

A solitary thistle,

Your accidental misstep confirms my end.

My thorns did not protect me;

My beauty lies in wrinkled ruins.

The sun grants no strength to my substance,
But the wind yields me a lasting chill.

Today, this hour, will be my final.

I will dismantle my purple wings,

And they will drift until a garden is found

Among forsaken dominions,

In the cracks of a broken boulevard.

Knowing

I have known how the mind
Can tippy-toe towards the soul,
Where your lost memories
Inherit my spirit.
Recalling the times
You would staple a love song to my heart.
I would be found, rewarded
With the bellied cocoon and chrysalis
Bursting forward those things
That would fly to my throat—
Keeping me from speaking,
Obviating my breath,
All occurring in the vanilla moments
Of your blinking or reading.
But when this frenetic love had coasted,
I gave my apostrophe to the mind.
If it knows what love is,
Then I loved him.

Blossoms of Tranquility

Evan Berg-Bierman

The soft breeze of March gave me comfort.
Its transfer of power from the sky passed through the trees in delight.
It flowed past my body like mists of water.
Refreshing, reinventing, restoring my inner thoughts.

My eyes trailed to the branches,
Holding elegant petals of red and white,
Their form dancing in the breeze,
And a smile broke free from captivity.
It made me think that I was one of those petals.
Dancing without cause; without reason.

I leaned against the bark of the tree.
And watched them as they were watching over me like angels.
A sigh of relief escaped my lips like a canary from an open cage.
I felt free; I felt... pure.

I felt as if the sweet sap ran through my veins,
And the rough, hollow bark shielded me from harm,
But the soft, delicate petals carried me away with eternal bliss.
And I danced with them

The soothing breeze of Spring enveloped us.
And I felt reborn as the sun watched us from the horizon.

The Lonely Flower

You are a flower in a wilted garden.
Though your friends – the lilies and daisies – are black,
You still emerge with color from a bitter winter.

You still dance and sway with all your might
As the roots begin to freeze and break
For it is determination of love that you shine
In a bright, white, motionless world.

You wave your petals,
Vibrant in purple and pink,
Sweet like peach blossoms,
Soft as lilac and lavender,
Strong like tiger lilies.
And you show that you are different than the others.

You prove that you thrive
Through bitter shades of white and grey,
Active with the life that runs through your stem.
You give joy and vibrancy to other fellow blossoms like you.

And though you may see death all around you,
The frozen petals and stiff branches,
You remain to give life to those you see dead
You help enrich the Spring.

You are a blossom.
You bloom with love and care,
And you are beautiful.

A Storm

Emily Moore

It builds
a cloud here, a cloud there
a little rain
sunny sky, bright blue
grass grows
then it builds again
a streak of grey, a flash of light
a downpour, it just keeps coming
the grey just keeps coming
it's almost black
the sky cries
until
until sunlight breaks through
there may be a few more scattered clouds
every now and then
the sky seems to have a few more tears to shed
but at the end of every good cry
comes the light
perfect light

I Can Feel Music

I can feel music Between my toes Between my fingers I can pull it
Move it
Twist it
It flows around
It makes me turn
It makes me fly
I can taste it
I can smell it
It makes my blood flow
I can feel it flowing through my hips
Feel it running over my lips
It makes my heart beat
It causes me to breathe in and out
I can feel music

A Hope for Healing

Siraya Windsor

Torturous trials, endless days
Salted wounds, wicked ways
Snarls and scratches, unmoral dealing
Broken bones that know no healing
Abduction, Addiction, Disruption, Confusion
Yet, in the midst of a hopeless vision
breaking beneath the barrier of callused earth,
A baby bud dares to press
Disrupting damnation without asking for pardon
Blushing in its boldness to bloom

A Little More Than Sixteen Candles

Micheal Woodard

Sixteen winters ago, I saw her walking down the street
I remember thinking that was when I first felt what it was like to
breathe

She held my attention captive, like a romantic, poetic scene
The snow had covered her footprints by the time she had seen me
I had imagined her feeling the same way, but my heart didn't
believe me

It had only deceived me, leading me to put my trust in something
that would leave me

The city had eyes that night, I knew because I felt them watching
And the sky had different intentions when it sent two snowflakes
that were matching

But I had never longed more for summer weather than when I
saw her

Because I knew then I'd feel the warmth of the sun
And maybe the warmth of her too

God knows that I'd been cold for far too long, so I'd have to wait
for the sun to shine

Or I'd wait for her to be mine

Either way, it would be worth it all along.

I hadn't seen her since that day, but please know that she never
left my mind

The way she walked, the way her eyes passed mine, it was unlike
no other I'd ever find

It was like the climax of a famous tale told one word at a time
So I wouldn't miss a single thing, not a single detail, not a single
line

I felt like I'd been asleep for my entire life and was now awake at
a glance of her

I never believed in love at first sight but I craved the heat of fire
after my first burn

I dreamed of her under a crescent moon and cheering stars
Pausing the turning of the world and putting into sync our
beating hearts
I prayed for sleep, so I might wake up tomorrow and see if
something has changed
But after all these nights, I know it's an empty longing, filled with
loneliness and pain
God knows that I'd been cold for far too long, so I'd have to wait
for the sun to shine
Or I could wait for her to be mine
Either way, it would be worth it all along.

Then there was the day I had planned on leaving on a train
I sat in the seat and looked out of the window as it was blurred by
rain
But then I saw a familiar face step onto the platform
A face that seemed to be looking to be set free
That was when she walked aboard and sat down in the seat next
to me
I thought "Could it be?"
It was the woman of my mind, the desire of my soul, the heaven
to my hell
She said "Do I know you?"
I thought, "No, but I'd like to think that I know you all too well."
It was a long train ride, and we had the chance to talk of
memories and past glory
But then she proceeded to ask to share her long lost love story
I gave eager permission with an "of course" and hid on my face all
of the emotions in my head
She then took a long, deep sigh and this is what she said:

"Sixteen winters ago, I saw this man walking down the street
It was snowing and I had all of a sudden felt a loving heat take
over me
It seemed like time had stopped and the whole world was taking
notice
Like God had taken the time to write a love story just for us
An overwhelming choir in the clouds, singing out a beautiful and
familiar chorus

Fireworks illuminated my sky in colors I had never known
But it had strangely unearthed feelings of being alone
Because I knew it was too good to be true and the summer
 warmth was long overdue
God knows I had been cold for far too long, so I'm waiting for the
 sun to shine
Or I could wait for him to be mine
Either way, it would be worth it all along.

When I saw the sunset over the horizon, it helped me to
 remember him and forget the rest
The breeze brushed my face like all the thoughts I had second
 guessed and made a mess of
Ever since that night, I was able to see the moon more clearly
 even through the clouds
But that never erased my grim demeanor or put faith in the spot
 of my doubts
My heart pulsed along with the ticking clock as I sat in waiting for
 him

I felt loneliness' heavy weight in my veins and heartache race to
 the ends of my every limb
I went through the motions of life, as if my soul was just
 mouthing its most powerful church hymn
There was a lingering presence of despair, and a deadly poison of
 sorrow in the air
God knows I had been cold for far too long, so I'm waiting for the
 sun to shine
Or I could wait for him to be mine
Either way, it would be worth it all along.”

She then stopped and we looked at one another like we had
 known each other for years
She then realized who I was and gasped and I wiped away her
 tears
We had been the subject of each other's desire for sixteen winters
 and a day
Then we felt a quiet calmness in our hearts, as all sadness was

washed away
Both of us looked out of the train window as the sun began to
shine
God knew we had been cold for far too long, and I was now hers
and she was now mine
And we'll always say that it was worth it all along.

Son, I tell you this story about your mother and me so that you
will never give up on love
That sorrow is fleeting, and every good and perfect gift is from
above
Remember to never give up, and if you must fight, my son, be a
fighter
Because moments of darkness make the sun shine brighter.

Night

Zach Cline

Night
is something we all sleep in,
accepting that the day we love
has disappeared and now we rest
for tomorrow.

Night
is what comforts us in our solitude
as we accept it as an old friend
knowing that when the day goes away,
night comes again.

Night
comes to haunt us in our darkest times
when we're trapped in an abyss of sorrow
and suffering from an insomnia of thoughts
to keep us awake.
but we'll never be prepared.

Night
is an open fire to keep us warm,
the sky that gives the heat we feel
when we see all the stars and the moon
peering on us.

Night
is a blizzard we're trapped in,
emotions buried underneath the fluff
with only tears to soothe the pain,
fading into slumber.

Night
is something we look at differently,
seeing everyone's secrets
revealing themselves at
the darkest of hours.

Night will always come,
but we'll never be prepared.

Purple

Something's going to break
Whether it's me or the copy
Who stares back at me.

How could this be?
My eyes filled with hate
To only one person: me.
(You can not save me.)

Why am I just the bait,
Using the smile to trick
The idea of happiness.

How could I be
Something I lie about
When I'm just the shadow I see.?
(Why do you torture me?)

Why won't you leave?
Why do you not listen?
I'm always fine on my own.
(I'm living a lie.)

I'm always the fool to say that.
I am always alone and
You're not the first to say
"I will stay."
(Don't promise something you can't keep.)

I stare up into the sky.
Even if you are there,
Still reminded of everything.
(Give me the illusion of being real.)

Shards of that shattered image
Still in the room before me,
Red covers the atmosphere.
Blue drops hit the body,
fears awaken in us,

As my eyes open.
(I can't deny this anymore.)

The power you have
Shakes the building
Into the ground.

I look back into that broken mirror and I see...

All I See Is Red

Tristina Miller

They walk down the street,
Wonder if they notice me.
I don't look like them, but
I used to be one of them.

Standing in the shadows
My body feels hollow.
The life inside of them
Beckons me with its glow.
I'm infected, left unprotected.
You promised you'd keep watch but somehow

I got caught.

Misdirected, I'm infected.
I took the bite, without a fight and now
Red
All I see is red.

What is happening?
I can't feel anything.
The sky is turning black.
I know now
There's no going back.

Overpowering. Rage pulses through me.
I try to fight it, but
The hunger controls me.
I do not have a home.
Who you are doesn't matter to me.
What I crave and what I need
Is your warm heartbeat.

The Room Fades to Blue

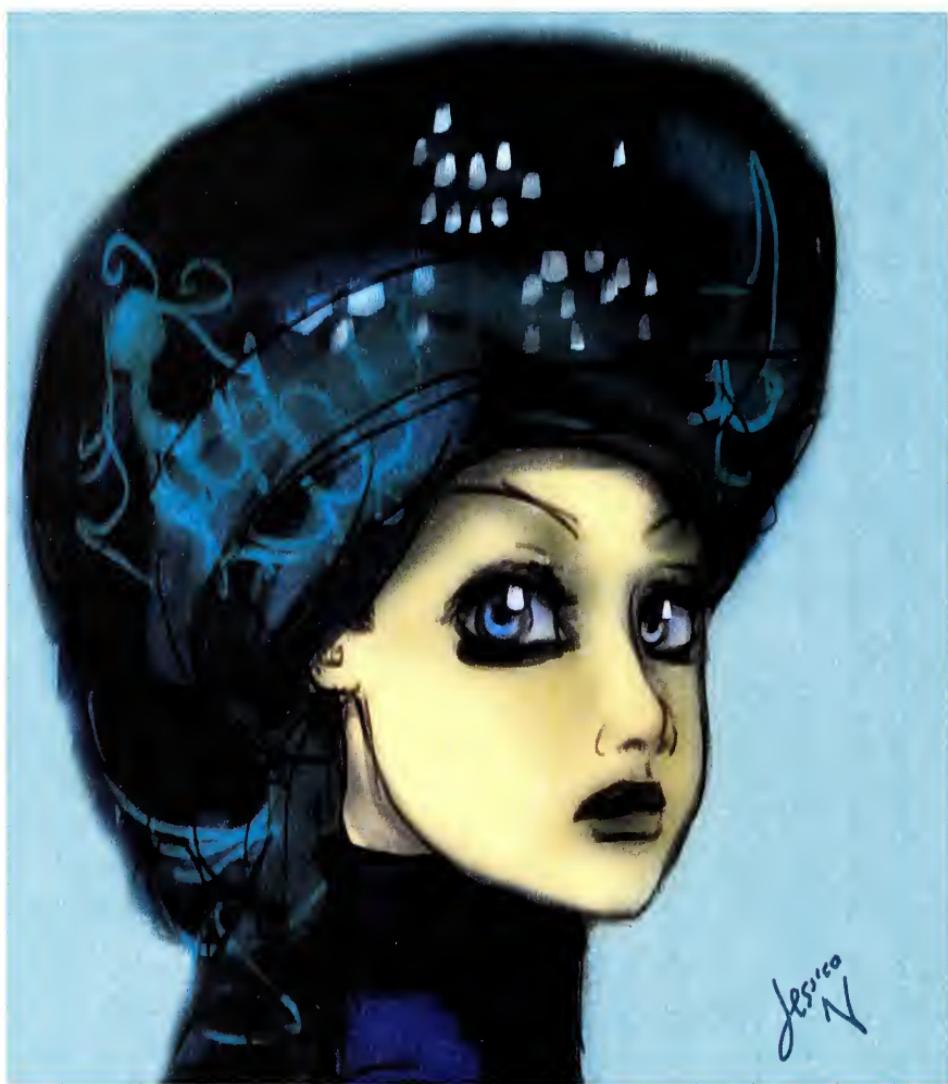
The room fades to blue,
At the thought of you.

The room fades to blue
When I put that record on,
It all fades to blue.
Three Dog Night keeps playing on.

The room fades to blue
The static of the needle.
With every shot of Evan it all fades to blue,
You make your own personal Heaven.

I've never been to Spain,
Yet the room still fades to blue.
It all fades to blue because of you.

I can no longer listen to Three Dog Night,
You've turned my heart blue.



“Girl in Blue” by Jessica Nkwocha

Selected Haikus

Sarrah Strickland

Stress

Housesitting is great.
Free food, TV, and I'm paid
Such a stressful job...

My Love

Oh, How I love thee,
Let me try to count the ways.
Oh wait, wrong person.

My Health

I want a cookie,
A giant delicious treat.
Oh . . . diabetes.

Pants

Leggings are not pants.
Just because you can wear them,
Doesn't mean you should.

The Roar

Ocean tides roll in
White foam lapping at the shore
Ripping sound away

On Writing

To write a haiku
Is to throw-up on paper
All your inner thoughts.

The Stroke

My brain is melting,
And this class is killing me.
I can't feel my arms.

My Pet

To have a moustache
Is to have a furry pet.
Careful, though, he bites.

Rebel Much?

I am a rebel;
I haven't shaved in a week,
And I failed a quiz.

Children

I wish for a pet—
Smart, loyal, fuzzy, house trained . . .
Could I rent a child?

Ice

My hands are ice cubes.
If only my heart were warm,
My fingers might thaw.

Blindness

There once was a fish,
But he was missing an eye...
So they called him fsh.

Fiction



“Sarrah” by Monique Gaboriau

Can You Hear Their Triumphant Howl?

John Webb

This is a remarkable and strange occasion: an Athenian theatre of silicon and aluminum, a wide crescent of descending steps, the stage of steel sprayed down with anti-glare dead-center, and the audience all floating inches off their seats. Everyone waits attentively. This theatre is the governor's passion project, and this is its grand opening. Ticket sales indicate roughly 67% of the colony is in attendance, but the crowd seems much larger; it was assumed later that many others—teenagers and young adults mostly—had propelled themselves up over the wire net.

A man, the narrator, strolls onto the stage—people of the lunar colony have a very distinct gait, spread-legged, almost a hop—and, speaking into a small mic, addresses the audience:

“On behalf of Governor Cyrus and the entire Colonial General Assembly, it is my highest honor to present to you all a most remarkable story, one that occurred partially on this very same lunar soil.

“Without giving too much away—and we wouldn’t want to spoil it—it is the story—well, at its core it is the story of a young boy who is alone and then not alone. Forgotten and then remembered.

“However, it is also an historical account of our beloved colony. It accounts a parallel story to that of our colony: as the boy grew and changed, so did we. As the boy persevered, we persevered!

“I would hope that you, the audience, dear listener, dear watcher, would please hold your applause until the very last word is spoken, until the very last invisible period passes into silence. Our Governor Cyrus was so moved by the events that he commissioned this theatre to be built and this play to be written—your politeness and attention is much appreciated.

“At the end—ah yes at the end everything will be understood. At the end you will be, it is our dearest hope, satisfied and content. But perhaps not. Perhaps you won’t. As with most things, it hardly matters; it only matters that the matter is finished.

“So let us get on with the matter—let us go on.”

The audience claps politely and the narrator bows, leaves the stage. A three-dimensional projection creates what appears to the audience as the inside of a ship (most colonials being familiar with ships). Two actors—a boy and his father—enter the set (the ship), and they begin their little drama.

Oh, son—son! Look at me. Turn that freakishly thick skull around and look at your father. That's a good boy. You, being just a young tike at three doesn't preclude you from learning the family business, though I barely know what I'm doing. Your father has learned a lot these past few years, but not enough. Not enough. Boy. Son. Come here. You see, there are two types of people in the world: the haves and the have-nots. The doers and the do-nots. Your mother and I—oh, God—I'm not crying; just give me a minute. Your mother and I made an executive decision. We placed our bets. Revealed our hands. Went all in. That's why we're out here in the first place. That's why I have to teach you this. That's why you have to learn this. Because this—it's all we have now. Well, currently, but that's subject to change. If our plan works, we'll be fine. More than fine. Just. Dandy. If our plan works, you'll have nothing to worry about. Neither will your kids or your kids' kids. We'll have three generations set for life.

Son! Boy, come back here. To the window, look: follow my finger: that ugly red planet with the deep black trenches is Mars. Remember when we passed by Mars a year ago? And what's that big, purply-blue planet over there called? Jupiter, not Juiciter son. Say it: Ju-pi-ter. Ter, not Tor, boy. Never mind, forget about the pronunciation. Where's the Sun? The Sun is always at our backs. The Sun is the wind in our sails. Good boy, you remembered.

Now, look here: you can't see them, but just in front of us are millions of asteroids caught between the gravitational forces of Mars and Jupiter. If our plan is to work, we'll have to extract one of those asteroids and mine it for minerals. This is a two-person operation, son. I can't inspect the asteroid and operate the crane at the same time. Son, boy! It's time you learned your trade. You'll be operating the crane. Follow me and I'll show you the controls. You won't have to worry about using the crane for another four years, but practice makes perfect. Give me your hands: you put your left hand on the directional stick and your

right hand on the clamper—clamper's not the technical term for it but we—we—I never figured out what it was called. Anyway, that will open and close the jaws.

Oh alright you got it, good work. You're trying to clamp down on old Juiciter, hey boy? It's too far away, son. Son!—don't throttle the stick. Gently push the stick forward and back. Slow and steady. This ship is God-knows-how old, so try not to break anything. Look at you keeping the crosshairs steady on that big blueberry of a planet!

You're a natural. Son—son, I'm proud of you. You've done me proud. One of these days I'll have to teach you how to really fly this thing. Just wait until your grandparents see you, once we're back on the colony—I know they'd be excited to finally meet their daughter's son. Sweet mercy, you'll be fourteen years old. And your mother!

Your mother would be so proud of you. No, she's not here. I can't tell you where. She's sick. Sick of something incurable. Now, that's enough of this: let's have supper. What do we always do just before supper? That's right, good boy, the candle. I'll even let you light it tonight. Don't burn yourself. What else do we do? That's right—we incline our heads, just so, toward the direction of Earth, and remember our family.

"Shouldn't we be doing this at night?"

"Mr. Brandson, have you ever seen a rocket launch at night? It's bright. Loud as in garish. 'And the rocket's red glare' and all that. It's a neon sign that screams, 'I'm right here! Come and get me!' It screams amateur. I'm not an amateur."

"But what if someone sees us? Why are you laughing?"

"Because you have no idea what you're talking about! The ship is going to be seen no matter what you do."

"So what if we get caught?"

"So what if you get caught? Listen very closely, Mr. Brandson: the lunar colony is like the wild west. No one here respects the law, least of all me. What do you think is going to happen after you've launched? You think the police are going to give chase in machine-gun-mounted shuttles? You think they're going to scramble nuclear missiles and blow you to pieces? The police can't enforce the law in low orbit because of the law. Munitions Free Space Pact. Look it up if you don't believe me."

"I don't know about this."

"Let me remind you that I've been doing this for a long time, Mr. Brandson. I've sent more desperate Joes to the belt in rickety boats in the past twenty years than NASA in its lifetime. My scrapyard sees a lot of business. Allow me to also remind you that you have no choice. Especially considering I've already off-loaded your debt onto several shell companies."

"What? Already?"

"They could still follow us. They could track us and arrest us as soon as we touch down."

"Theoretically, yes. That is a possibility. But what Joe Blow cop is prepared to follow you for fourteen years? And when you return—if you return—you'll have been long deleted from their memory banks, trust me. Illegal launches that don't result in immediate casualties—such as hijackings—are considered cold cases as soon as you're out of sight."

"Listen, hey—I work. But now I have to rely on you to pay me back. I have to trust your word. Is your word any good to me?"

"What if I decide not to go through with this? This would be an awful ordeal for my family."

"I'll answer that ill-advised hypothetical by saying that no one who's refused me has lived to brag about it."

"Then I really don't have a choice. Would you reconsider your initial offer?"

"Just because your wife's pregnant doesn't mean you can blow off the commitment you made to me, Mr. Brandson. You wanted the best mining ship I could find—it's right here, waiting. You wanted your debts taken care of—done. The impetus is on you, Mr. Brandson, to hold up the agreement."

"I gave you my home, everything we owned—"

"You also gave me your word. How far along is she?"

"Eight months."

"Due to pop. A kid growing up in microgravity, that's a tough one. The kid'll be deformed—big head, from the fluid accumulation—and brittle. Real, real brittle. Even with lunar gravity the freak might just collapse into a heap of goo once the ship touches down."

"Don't talk about my child. Or my wife."

"Fine. I won't. As long as you keep this in mind: the police will definitely forget, but I most certainly won't."

"Fine, I'll remember."

"Once you're back, you'll know where to find me. If I'm

not in my usual haunts, like the scrapyard or whatever, ask around for Fitz. Now, if either of us expect you to succeed, I had better show you how to fly this thing. The first thing to mention is the solar sail—"

--which is like the sail you saw in the photo I showed you, you know the one son, the one of your great-great-great granddaddy on his sailboat, except--son, are you listening?--except that the sail's made out of alumina, not fabric. No, you can't see it from here. It's on the top of the hull, boy, so no you can't go and see the solar sail. It's big, way big, bigger than the ship, a wide rectangle of foil. Pay attention. Read my lips. The Sun emits microwaves which push against the sail. The ship gets pushed, son, pushed faster and faster. Which is the problem that we're currently trying to solve, boy. A few problems we're trying to solve, really: slowing down, making contact, extracting the material, and taking off again. So, yes, yes you can one-up your old man and say that everything is a problem. One step at a time. Anyway, this is why it takes years for humans to travel to and from the asteroid belt. No self-propulsion. The acceleration gained from the Sun's microwave bombardment is small but cumulative, so net speed evens out after a few years.

We're one year away from Celest-five, one year away from starting our return journey. I know it feels like ages to you, son, but I need you to hang in there. I've always told you that this is a two-man operation, haven't I? Broken ribs or no broken ribs, I need you to contribute. No, I don't know how you hurt yourself. Maybe I sneezed on you by accident. Brittle. Made out of glass and spit. Don't look at me like that, boy--hey, you're my big man. I'm counting on you. Crying won't help either of us. Now, I need you to listen and--and--oh God, now you've gotten me started. Give me a minute. Just a second. Son--son, do you think about her when we're lighting the candle before supper? Do you talk to her? I do. Every night. Son. Boy. I don't tell you this enough, but without you I'd likely die of loneliness and heartsickness. Just breathe and relax and let's get back to work. That's it, wipe those tears from your eyes and get back on the horse. Oh Lord, you don't know what a horse is, do you? A horse is like a large, smooth dog. What's a dog? Stop with the questions and let me show you how we're going to slow down. Takes two to complete this maneuver, so I need you at your A-game, okay son? Okay? Okay.

There's a mechanism that inverts the solar sail. The inverse is made of carbon fiber, which is stronger than alumina. It can handle a continuous laser blast. Boy, no, we're not shooting anything. The laser is going to negate our acceleration and bring us to a halt. Now, listen: we have just enough power to bring us to a stop, but from what I've experienced the generator is sparky. I have to pump the generator. That's my first job. No, it's too dangerous for you. Besides, I need you to invert the sail exactly when I tell you to. You're going to push this button right here, see? Do not touch this until I give you the green light, understand? We have to time this to the exact second. Too soon and we won't reach the asteroid. Too late and we collide and most likely die. The maneuver will take a week to complete. Son? No, don't worry about me, I'm fine. Just a bad cough is all. Your old man is like a battleship, kid. We should come to a complete stop near the asteroid Celest-five. Well well, that's one problem solved. Son—boy, we make a good team.

"All these amateurs," Fitz was saying, a cigarette drooping down practically ninety degrees from his mouth, "they haul back the most useless material: chunks of hydrogen, frozen water crystals. Like what are they even thinking? Fourteen years spent living in a rust-bucket and you bring back propulsion garbage? How do they expect me to turn a profit with this junk?"

Outside the dome the sky was airless, still, and dark. Earth loomed high above and to Fitz resembled a glowing ornament; the southern hemisphere black, the lights of cities burning and twinkling like buzzing clouds of fireflies. They were standing at the very edge of the colony, Fitz and Marcus, in a quarter still under construction. Unfinished buildings in various stages of completion surrounded them, a ghost town of plaster and naked girders. Everything smelled like paint. They were staring past their thin reflections in the dome's plastic, looking at the gray, barren moonscape. Milky, glacial-looking hills were lined alongside the Sea of Tranquility like the vertebrae of a spine. The hills stood sentinel over great abyssal plains that sat shrouded in straight sheets of dust tossed high weeks ago by exploratory rovers that were just now beginning to settle and fall.

"Bunch of lunar-born straights that can't tell feldspar from their asses, that's the problem." said Marcus, looking at Fitz's reflection.

Fitz took a drag of his cigarette, lifted up his foot and stamped it out on the heel. The ashes drifted to the lunar silt slowly, the lightest snowflakes. "You're right," said Fitz, "and that's why I tell these new guys: bring me back something valuable. Aluminum. Iron. Palladium even."

"Gold."

Fitz nodded. "Diamond if they're that lucky."

"The problem is finding a good rock in the first place."

"Already taken care of."

"Oh?" Marcus turned and leaned into Fitz, who was looking up at the placid blue Earth lording high above them.

"Yeah, Oh, it's done. They sent probes into the belt a hundred years ago to document mineral composition. This was all pre-Federal, before the United Nations really sunk its teeth into foreign policy. The Feds sealed up the records and hid them from private industry, but I finagled myself a copy."

"So which rock is it?" Fitz laughed. He turned to face Marcus, leaned in so that their faces were close, and said in a not-quite-whisper, "It's not a question of individual rocks, but a question of which class of rock. They classified them based on composition, after all."

Marcus smiled, "So which class is it?"

Fitz shrugged and turned back to watch the dust settle on the plains. "There are a few: Olympus, Jovian, Hercus, Celest--those are the big dogs."

"Earth's been mined out, stripped clean. We are going to make money."

"Marcus, you're the blandest man I know."

Marcus huffed. As night crept across the Earth's southern hemisphere, the clumps of orange lights flared in its wake.

"So, as I was saying, I started telling these guys to bring me back something valuable. So I give them a helpful nudge toward one of the tagged asteroids. I give them coordinates. Marcus, it's about more than money. It's a monopoly on information. We're all caught in the middle of a deep, dark wood, and we're the ones holding the map."

It is an opera of two performers. Asteroid and ship the principle actors. The asteroid a bulbous thing, trembling, wet with primordial moisture, tumbling in an uneasy uneven orbit. The ship at a standstill, enraptured, ensnared, captivated by the

asteroid's pirouetting dance. The ship twice, thrice, four times, five times as large as the rock that's terribly pretty beneath roving floodlights.

Stars and the distant swirl of other galaxies hang unfocused and hazy in the background. Suddenly in silent monochrome the harpoon unfurls from the ship's distended hull and quivers for a terrible moment before puncturing the asteroid. A winch begins pulling the two performers together, into one embrace, and the asteroid stops its coy turning and slows to a stop at the harpoon's draw. Perhaps, if the ship is large enough to support a hanger, a set of aluminum doors flutters open, and the ship proceeds to swallow the asteroid whole. Two bodies becoming one. Otherwise, the asteroid is pulled just close enough for a third performer to enter the scene. Small man in a spacesuit that floats into view, emerging like a cockroach from hatch or window. A man with lifeline attached to some furtive place on the hull that proceeds to bounce ungainly to the harpoon's point of penetration. The floodlights spot the intruder but can do nothing.

Maybe the man stands there on the asteroid's waiting body, stunned by its beauty--how to crack beauty with tiny cockroach legs?--and then maybe he gives a shout of victory and begins to skitter over her surface. More often and with increasing violence this man shouts--shouts and howls from within the pressurized hanger compartment, or from within the spacesuit squeezed by vacuum. Beastly hollers and exultation of invasive victory, the cries of Mongols coming over the Wall. Then this man waves back to the ship, and from the ship unfurls a second instrument, the crane and its claw, and man and ship become accomplices in this work. The claw fastens over the asteroid's fragile frame and begins to squeeze. A pickaxe rushes to its skin of frozen moisture. The man hacks and pounds while the claw's teeth grind and crush. At first, nothing gives way. Then heavy stones, rocks, pebbles, floating bright specs, breaking apart into smaller and smaller pieces. These fragments coolly collected by the man in his hanger, or by the man in his spacesuit, collected in gleaming bags stressed nearly beyond their capacity and fixed to the man's hip like trophies.

Then, their work complete, the claw unfastens and retracts. The man begins roping himself back into his hole in the hull. The harpoon unsheathes itself and is drawn back as well. A drained husk of itself, the asteroid begins to drift, delightfully unaware, and will continue to drift until a dwarf planet--like Ceres

or Eres--or even a major planet like Jupiter itself rights its path with a steady, gravitating hand.

And always the men shout and howl with glee. A hundred men at a hundred asteroids, shouting and howling: "Fitz was right! Fitz was right! There's gold here! I knew he wouldn't let me down!"

The boy called Terry Brandson sat at the supper table, without a thought in his head. A candle burned and flickered and gave off a sick, sweet vanilla scent that Terry had long ago gotten used to in the same sense as one becomes accustomed to their own breathing. This acclimation held true for the ship's undulating hum, and the whirring of the ship's CO₂ scrubbers, and the tiny minute beeps that occurred every six hours--automatic adjustments to the solar sail. If something malfunctioned, Terry knew it by sound. It was like hearing and feeling his own heart become erratic. In a sense not understood by many, the ship had become an extension of his body. He could tell you how the top left corner of his quarters felt on his fingertips and distinguish that corner--that square inch--from every other top left corner on the ship. The ship was Terry's shield, the metal womb shepherding him across the same tract of space it crossed years ago but that Terry could hardly remember.

Terry's father, Isaac Brandson, sat motionless across from Terry, head slumped onto his own chest. He was floating millimeters above the seat, Terry knew. A thin string of spit or snot levitated under his nose.

"You eating, Pops?" asked Terry, inclining his fork toward his father's plate. Isaac didn't move or respond.

"Pops?" Terry asked again. He couldn't take his eyes off the snot.

Terry had lately become accustomed to gently pushing his father out of bed and to the supper table to let the smell of food coax him awake. If there wasn't food beneath his face, Isaac would simply refuse to rouse himself. The pain was just too severe.

Under the circumstances, it hadn't come as a surprise. Terry figured that Isaac must have passed away in his sleep. Even still, when Terry finally checked his father's pulse and found nothing beating beneath his cold skin, even though there was no surprise, Terry cried. The only person Terry had ever known had

left him.

Terry draped a sheet over Isaac's body and straightened him out flat as a door. He wheeled Isaac through the ship's corridors, taking special care not to bump into anything. There were certain quarters that Terry had been forbidden from entering and that Isaac himself never spoke of or entered. But Terry had gone in and had seen--

He slid the doors open and set his father adrift. The body floated, bumped into the unused bed, and came to a stop above the floor there. Something about this signified to Terry a lasting, spiritual bond between Isaac and Terry's mother. Terry knew where not to look, but he could never ignore the smell, spoiled rotting smell, and he could never erase or negate the memory of his first peek into these quarters, the bloated deteriorating bag--

Terry returned to the supper table to finish eating. Later he would exercise. Terry listened closely, listened deep into the ship, to hear if anything was amiss.

Colonial politics was, at first glance, obtuse and complex, but once the bureaucratic tape was cut--the bureaucratic tape being Earth's Federal Government, of course--anything could be accomplished. As an independent state of the United Nations, the colony under threat of dissolution was required to comply with Federal laws and regulations; but a politician, who merely said, "Your signal never came through, what was the message again?" could plead innocence and ignorance to whatever draconian decree echoed from down the grape vine. The colony's satellites are notorious for mysterious malfunctions. This excuse gets harder to swallow if one politician hears one thing and another politician hears something else, which is why cooperation between party lines is crucial. The colony's general assembly has been called the most cooperative and demure in the entire U.N.

Normally, in order for a trade agreement to be struck between the Feds and an independent state, unions must be consulted and documentation of operations be presented to an assembly of nations. The colony circumvented these requirements by claiming that their unions (of which the colony has none) committed themselves verbally, and that the documentation must have been lost in transit. A hundred politicians saying the same thing can be fairly persuasive to an assembly. So when the colony drafted a trade agreement in regards to mineral procure-

ment and distribution, no questions were asked and every lip was sealed. It is unknown which member of the colonial general assembly drafted the agreement. Where the money goes is anyone's guess.

"Governor," called the concierge from the doorway, "you have a visitor."

The Governor's office was ornate, spherical how every building in the colony was spherical (sharp corners in low gravity environments are especially hazardous); wall-sized murals depicting the colony's beginnings were arranged on the far wall, starting with the first shuttle launch from Earth and ending with a panorama satellite view of how the colony looked today, sprawling and radial.

From behind a white desk whereon motes of dust floated in the light, the Governor looked up from his work.

"I always have visitors. Who is calling on me now?" he said, hand still gripping his pen.

The concierge stepped aside, revealing a young boy on crutches, arms and legs ballooned with bulky black braces. His skull was horrible, thick and alien. "He says you might be able to help him."

The Governor set down his pen and nodded, leaning back. The boy hadn't waddled a foot beyond the door before the Concierge closed it and left the Governor's chambers. With pain and deliberation the young man hobbled up onto a chair and, wincing, looked out the window.

"I see that you made it back safely. I heard about the crash landing. I do assume that was you?" The Governor smiled and folded his hands over his stomach.

But the boy wasn't listening. The great eye of a hurricane over Earth's Atlantic Ocean had caught his attention. For all intents and purposes he vanished from the room as the storm's immense, slow whirl drew him into the maelstrom. The Governor looked at him curiously, then cleared his throat. The boy's head whipped back to meet his gaze like a frightened animal.

"Just what is it you want?" asked the Governor.

"I'm looking for Fitz," the boy replied.

For a moment there might have been a gleam of recognition in the Governor's eyes, and then it disappeared.

The Governor smiled, leaned forward and said, "Speaking, though I'm known as Cyrus since I became Governor. I remember your folks. Your father. It looks like he held up his

end of the agreement after all. We're going to take good care of you. Can you tell me about the gold? Can you tell me how your parents passed--how they lived?"

Seven Seconds

John Webb

You've experienced this moment before.

You've experienced this moment a hundred times before.

This particular moment when you realize the wall between you and her has officially been raised. The moment wherein she concludes that the attractiveness ratio between you and her is woefully imbalanced. This gap of attraction is insurmountable.

And as soon as she senses you approaching her, as soon as you dare cross the invisible line between you and her, this line marked "acquaintance," all her alarms and wind-chimes hollering and tingling madly—you've already lost. You've become a sudden embarrassment to her existence.

Inevitably, some innocuous remark, an innocent question, some nascent and naïve comment will prompt her uplift of eyebrows into disdainful surprise and down-curl of lips into half-concealed frown: indicators of conversation between friends but not between two people whose attractiveness ratio is too lopsided.

Example:

"Hey, so yeah. So hey Did you, I mean, *how* did you do on that test—*uh*—exam in Ms. Whochamacallits's class-course?"

The girl's response to any other bashful innocent question like this example is not her real reply, not the words she speaks; instead, the girl's response is projected by her eyes. Her eyes flicker up and down.

Her eyes say, "Hit the gym, and maybe you can think about thinking about approaching me like this."

You are an unshaped blob approaching the throne of a goddess (or so you've tricked yourself into believing).

During the day, you talk it over with your friends.

"Hey, so I'm thinking about thinking about thinking about talking to this girl."

The consensus is that you're crazy.

That night you dream a long dream. You're dreaming about thinking about thinking about thinking about talking to this girl. You wake up in the early A.M. heat sweating and screaming. *Not even in your dreams.*

But let us return to that earlier particular encounter but with the situation reversed. The universe flipped. You with chiseled abs and football physique and a girl is asking you to lunch, and *in this one moment*, you sense some kind of boundary being violated. Holler of alarms and tingle of wind-chimes. All of a sudden, you are the extremely busy one, not she—an exam to study for, vague events to attend—*I have a thing*—paintings to paint, sonnets to write, a world to save.

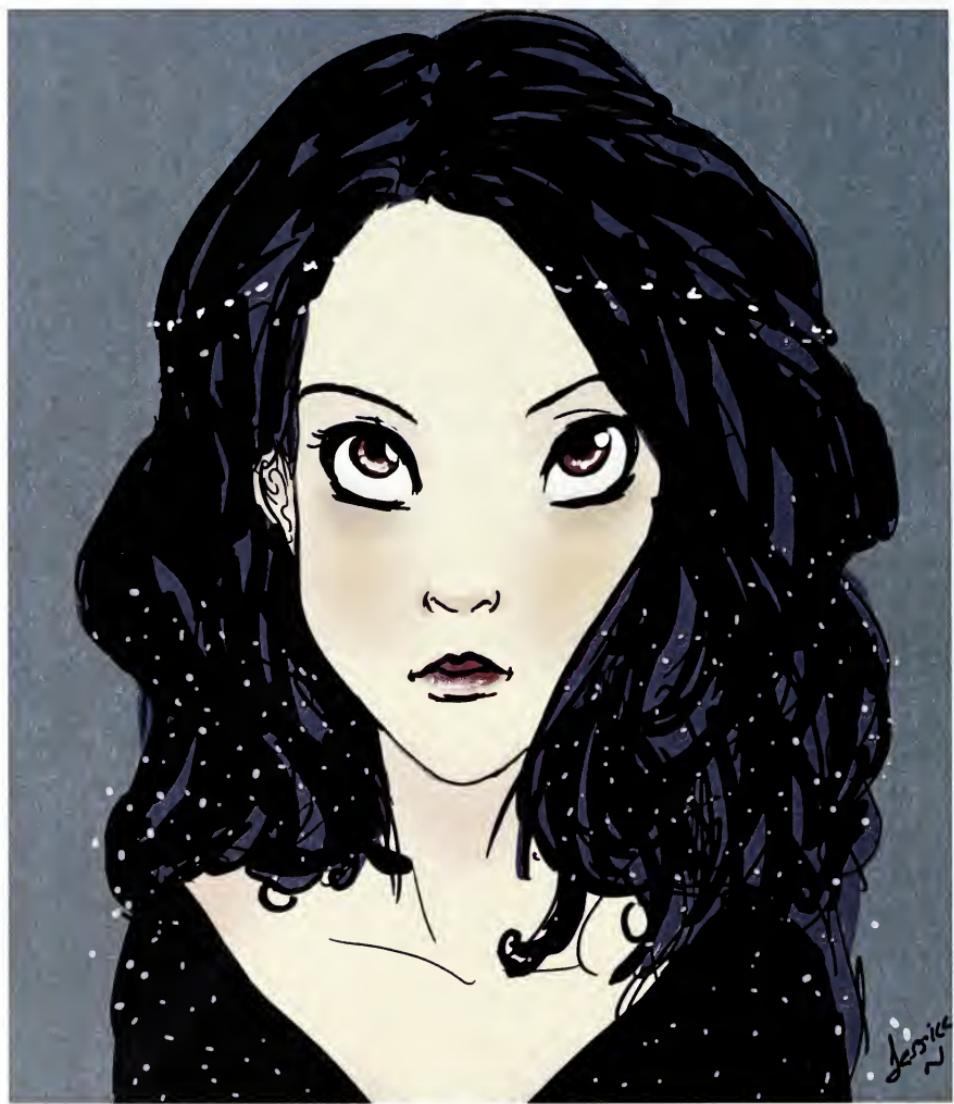
You are embarrassed by her presence, her presumptiveness.

How dare she think about thinking about approaching you like this?

These things shouldn't be done to people, the social taboos: the cold shoulder, the pandering remark, that condescending flicker of eyes. But now you have inflicted on someone what you said shouldn't be inflicted on anyone.

It takes seven seconds for a human being to determine whether another person is attractive.

She's gone. You're walking, realizing we're all slaves to our baser drives. We stand in relation to one another in the scope of seven seconds, under the rule of the mighty Ten-Point Scale. Those below us are invisible; those above us we will never reach.



“Lonely Girl” by Jessica Nkwocha

One Should Never Experiment With Bath Salts

Tristina Miller

It's been three months since the Center for Disease Control went public with their "bath salt/LSD" theory. Three months ago my friends were still alive.

Now, I'm not usually the first to deny someone's word immediately and I'll admit that they had a pretty convincing story: man goes crazy while hallucinating on bath salts, his body overheats, and he proceeds to eat a homeless man's face off. That all sounded believable enough. But the story is that when the police tried to get him to stop the attack, he turned and growled at them, and they had to shoot him repeatedly before he would die. That's when I knew something was wrong.

The infection spread quickly, probably quicker than expected, but none of the others—the people who were too busy living their fun and normal lives—were willing to accept that they had been lied to by their government. Big time. One can only rely on the officials to do the "right" thing for so long before cover stories become the norm. While some continued to go on about their lives as though nothing had happened, me and a few others in my neighborhood were noticing the piles of stories, lies, and myths being doled out by the media and government.

Meetings were held all over the U.S. to assure the public that they were indeed safe, that there was no reason to be alarmed. "Remain calm," they said. "We will catch these drug dealers and they will be arrested." While those waste-of-time meetings were being held, we were having meetings of our own: our neighbors, my brother Micah, my kid sister Sherie, and me. Turned out, we weren't the only ones who thought that there was a bigger problem lying below the surface. If there weren't a problem, then why would the authorities feel the need to constantly "reassure" the public? We weren't having it.

It was Micah's idea to have these meetings. We taught each other how to shoot guns, plant and harvest crops, and other survival skills. Of course, we all attended these meetings thinking nothing would ever actually happen. How could we ever really be ready? All we knew of these "bath salt junkies" was what we had heard on the television. Mrs. Cranly from across the street

pointed out a few of their similarities with zombies from all those “fake” shows on T.V. No one in the group seemed to dismiss her theory, so we went with it: studying as many zombie flicks as we could fit into our day. Sometimes, though, they were just parties because zombies weren’t real, right? That’s what I used to think, but now we’re stuck in Holly Hill in some dead guy’s apartment above a drugstore. I’m not sure what’s going to happen to us after all of this is over so I’ve decided to write down what happened the day the lives of the human race changed.

Our house was in a cute, over-crowded subdivision full of cookie-cutter makes of the house next door and the house next door to that one and so forth. Cute little pond out back with a fenced in yard, close enough to the interstate in case we needed to leave quickly for hurricane evacuations, and far enough into the trees to be serene for dog walks and bike rides. Other than our sometimes-obnoxious neighbors and their stray dogs always running lose, our neighborhood was quiet. It was just Micah, Sherie, and me by then but there used to be more. I guess I should just tell you...

It was 3 o’clock on the 8th of November and it had been raining for days. Our parents had been away for the week on vacation celebrating 25 years of marriage.

“Mom just called to complain about the weather here and tell me how Jamaica was nothing like this, blah blah blah... they’re on their way home,” Micah shouted from the garage.

I figured I’d surprise them by making dinner, so I pulled out my cookbook decided on Sherie’s favorite: spaghetti. I set the table like any other day and glanced over at the clock to see that it read 4:27. We lived thirty minutes from the airport but there was still no sign of them. I searched for Micah and found him in the garage, still lying underneath his Jeep.

“You heard from Mom or Dad again since earlier? I thought you said they were on their way.” I tried not to sound too worried.

“Traffic maybe?”

Almost two hours had passed when I heard the doorbell ring. I shouted at Micah from the laundry room to get the door even though I knew he probably couldn’t have heard me. He must have heard the door, though, because the next thing I knew, he was standing in front of me with two officers.

He looked at me and said “Lacey, It’s gonna be alright.” And then I knew that our parents were not coming home.

On the day that everything changed, I pulled into the driveway and couldn’t help but notice that the weather was beautiful. The warmth of the sun was calling me to throw on my bathing suit and head straight for the pool, but I knew I couldn’t. It was the third week of August, which meant class was in full swing. I guess I could have been happy that all of my classes were in the morning; it gave me time to drop Sherie off at school on my way and then I could be home when she got off the bus. She liked it when I drove her in the mornings because then she didn’t have to deal with “the annoying noise of morning chatter.”

Sherie is the kind of girl who walks around with a book in her hands. She doesn’t play sports, unless you consider bike riding a sport. She and Dad used to ride every day together around the neighborhood. But my sister, she’s tough. For her birthday last year she requested three things from us: 1) nose piercing, 2) seeing Parachute in concert and 3) her own gun. The first two I was okay with, but the third took some convincing. I didn’t have a problem with her owning a gun but at first, I didn’t understand why she would want one. I worked at a shooting range a few nights, but I ended up there by accident: ticked off at one of my professors for giving me a crappy grade on my paper about women’s rights in the Victorian period, I decided to go blow off some steam. I had never shot a gun before, but when I was 19, let’s just say that the two-year anniversary of my parents’ death was not going over so well with me. Things felt out of control. Shooting that gun felt good. So, in the end, I guess I could understand why Sherie would want that feeling too.

I dropped my backpack and crossed the living room to the kitchen table covered in books. It looked more like a disaster zone than a table. I sat down to remind myself of why I should be excited about reading “The Bride of Lammermoor” and only two words came to mind—Bachelor’s degree. Well, maybe three words, *Sherie* and *Bachelor’s degree*. Micah had been picking up extra shifts at Best Buy, but I knew he really wanted to get out of there. Cars were his thing, but Tire Kingdom only gave him three days a week. Plus, as one of the older seniors at college, I felt the growing impatience most 24-year-olds feel when life still hasn’t started. Degree = money = life.

I had finished the last page when I had heard a car alarm going off. I tried to ignore it, but the sound was not stopping. I knew it couldn't have been far, maybe a couple of blocks away. I stepped outside to discover which direction I was hearing it from. What happened next is still hard to explain or even believe. None of our prep meetings could ever prepare me for it.

I saw Sherie running as hard as I'd ever seen her run, across the neighbor's lawn, by the pond. She was screaming, "Let me in! Let me in!" Her arms were flailing and she dropped her backpack to gain more speed. Then I realized what she was running from.

About 15 yards behind her was a man, no shirt, no shoes, only pants. He was covered in what looked like blood. His stomach was cut up severely and parts of his insides hung out. He was reaching for her, throwing his arms with every swipe. I immediately ran in the house, flipped up the couch cushion, and grabbed my 9 Mil. As I stepped back outside, I saw Sherie trying to jump the fence, but before she could, the Junkie grabbed a hold of her shirt. His eyes were red like he had been crying blood. She was screaming at me to "shoot him" but seeing one in real life was nowhere comparable to watching movies or those fake paper targets that I had practiced with at the range. My heart stopped. I trembled as I pointed the gun at his head and took a deep breath.

I stood there for what felt like hours, and I finally managed to pull the trigger. My aim was a little off, and I hit him in the shoulder.

"Lacey! Get him off of me!" Sherie cried, as she kicked and screamed. I had to get it right. I knew that I would never have forgiven myself. So I took one more shot, and it went right through the ear, into the brain. His gnashing sounds ceased and his corpse flopped to the grass. (The movies were right, by the way; the brain does the trick.) Sherie jumped up and continued the last few yards to the back door.

"Where's Micah?" she said. "We need to do something. They're gonna be everywhere soon." There was blood on her shoes. Her hair was a mess, and I kept trying to grab her by the shoulders to get her to stop pacing and talk to me, but she was freaking out.

"Lacey, it's happening, just like the T.V. said, but he wasn't human. Did you see his stomach? And his eyes were full of blood. So much blood." She was shaking. "He jumped out in front of the school bus, and Ms. Cox had to swerve to miss him. She

lost control and slammed into a car over on Delafield. It was all smoky and it was hard to see, but I could hear him—that man growling outside the bus. He kept beating on the door to get in.”

In between breaths she panted, “There are more like him; I saw James’ little brother get bitten. They all just started eating each other. I climbed out the back of the emergency exit with Blake, and we just ran. A few others got away too. There was blood everywhere...so much blood. Blake ran off towards his house. And then I looked back and that man saw me and came running.” She kept shaking her head. “There will be more coming any minute.”

My first thought was getting to Micah. I texted and called him, but he didn’t reply. It wasn’t like him to not answer. Best Buy was only around the corner, so I knew we could get to him quickly. “We can’t just stand here Lacey,” Sherie stared at me, expecting I’d have an answer. I was freaking out inside, but I couldn’t let her know that at the time.

We split up rummaging through the house. In the meetings, we had prepared emergency bags stored with food and water, stashed throughout the house for moments like an attack. I ran up to my room, reached under the bed to grab my bag.

Micah’s was a little heavier than mine, with more ammo I think, but I grabbed his, too. There just wasn’t any reason to stay there. The best idea at that point was to grab our things and go get Micah. I couldn’t do this on my own. I needed him.

As I ran down the stairs I heard a scream from outside. I looked out the window, and I saw smoke coming from the upstairs window of Mrs. Cranly’s house. Another car alarm began to blast through the streets. I felt helpless inside the house. With every passing moment we spent inside, the louder it got outside.

I shouted up the stairs, “Sherie let’s go!”

She came running down the stairs, bag over her shoulder and her boots on. We each pulled out our guns, and I grabbed the keys to the truck. Sherie looked at me and tried to turn her face before I saw the tear on her cheek. I knelt down in front of her and reassured her that she was safe with me. “This is why we’ve been spending all that time at the range, remember?” I was scared to death without Micah there but I’m sure not going to let her know that.

“What if we don’t make it to the truck? What if my aim is off? I don’t want to become like them.”

“Sherie, I will never allow that to happen, you hear me?”

Never. Now let's go get Micah and he will know what to do."

I heard a window bust. It sounded like it came from the back door.

Growling echoed through the house. Around the corner into the kitchen, a junkie tried to break his way in through the glass. He was tearing up his face and his skin was peeling back off the bones as he ripped it through the shards of glass that were sticking into his eyes.

"Is that one of them? I can hear growling," Sherie whispered to me. I grabbed a hold of the doorknob, with my gun ready. It was time to go. I counted: "One, Two, Three!"

Our once quiet neighborhood was not so quiet anymore. Multiple car alarms blasted their warnings through the streets. A body lay in the middle of the road about 20 yards away. Flames shot from Mrs. Cranly's upstairs.. As I observed everything, I almost forgot what danger we were in with all that was going on around us. Just an hour before, I had been doing homework, and now we were fighting to stay alive. I snapped back into reality; as real or fake as it seemed, it was reality. People really were eating people, and I really needed to get out of there.

I fumbled in my hands for the right key to unlock the truck. I pushed the unlock button. "Get in" I shouted.

We tossed the bags into the back seat, hopped in, and slammed the doors—locking them from the horror that lied outside. As I turned the key, I heard that heavenly song better known as Micah's ringtone.

"Sherie grab my phone. It's in the green bag."

"Micah?"

"Yeah, where are you?"

"We're in the driveway, but we've loaded up the stuff and we are on our way to you," I said.

"There are sirens going off all around and I saw people running to their cars. What's going on?"

"Sherie got attacked on the bus by a Junkie. She's okay, but Micah....it's happening. I knew we were right not to trust the T.V." I said.

"Get here now. Drive around the back, and I'll meet you there."

"Okay. I love you."

"Love you too."

I drove the long way to avoid going anywhere near the school bus. On the way, we passed vehicles with doors open in the ditch. In one vehicle, a woman covered in blood and missing an arm hung out of the driver seat. I told Sherie not to look, but she did anyway. Deeper into the neighborhood, more smoke came and groups of people stood in the middle of the street. I quickly turned the other direction, heading out of the neighborhood. If a cop was out on patrol and cared at the moment, he'd probably have pulled me over for speeding, but I got a free pass.

We made our way down Sheep Island road, and I turned in behind Best Buy. Micah opened the back door and jumped in.

“My jeep is down at Tire Kingdom, we gotta go get it. My gun is in there and we could use the extra vehicle. How much gas do you have?” Micah asked. That was the Micah I knew: already taking the lead and making plans.

“Half a tank,” I said.

“That might work until we can find a safe place. How bad is it?” he asked.

I waited to let Sherie talk.

“Micah, I can’t believe it. We can’t go home, whatever it is...it spread quick.”

“Where do we go, Micah?” I asked.

“I guess we can try for the lake house.”

“Well, we have been keeping it stocked with supplies, so it should be okay until we figure out what exactly is going on. That is...if we don’t just become another cover up,” I said.

“There’s no way they can cover it up this time. How would they?” Sherie asked.

We made it to Micah’s Jeep and decided that Sherie should go with Micah—I knew she’d be safe with him. We split up prep bags and ammo and hit the road. The lake house had been our hangout since we were kids. Since it was about 45 minutes away, up in Santee, we hoped that the Junkies hadn’t gotten that far. I looked up at the sun that was tempting me earlier and thought, *hey, at least it’s not raining.*

I was an optimist then.

Little Girls Named After Shakespearean Heroines Anonymous

Victoria Murray

“Well, everyone, are we all here? Greeaat, um, let’s get started then?”

The speaker was the only one in the circle whose nametag was plastic, pinned to the lapel of her suit jacket, instead of a sticker with a name written with a drying marker. She looked increasingly nervous with each group meeting.

“So, um, do we want to start off calling roll or just start popcorning our contributions? Oh! Um, I actually have a guest contributor today—but, I, ah, guess I wanted to leave that as kind of the climax of the meeting...”

A hand shot into the air and the speaker seized on it.

“Hi, my name is Portia, and my mother named me after a Shakespearean heroine,” she recited from her slump in a mass-produced stackable chair.

“Hi, Portia,” the circle echoed.

She spoke like a grocery list: “I was mocked in school because I had a weird name. Then everyone thought I was named after a car. Kids are freaking stupid. High school was stupid. And then I get to college and actually read *The Merchant of Venice*. Yaaay. Now I know that my Mom named me for ‘one of the strongest women in all of literature,’ and I choose to ignore Brutus’ largely irrelevant wife in *Julius Caesar*. I’m done.” She had been scratching at a layer of dried cuticle during her recitation, and triumphantly removed it with her finish.

“Thank you, Portia,” sighed the group leader. “Do you have anything new to report?”

“Other than my mother knew full well she was naming me Portia and was completely oblivious to any circumstance outside of literary criticism regarding giving a child such a name? Nnn-ope,” she answered with a distinct pop.

Another hand rose.

“Hi, I’m Desdemona, and you really shouldn’t name your child Desdemona.”

“Desde—” the speaker started, but Desdemona silenced her with a wave, leaning forward in her seat.

“Look, yeah, I know, name positivity and all that. I get it. And it’s not that I dislike my name, and I have actually gotten past the, ah, childhood trauma of *never* being able to find my name on a commemorative keychain. Promise. But let’s be real here: Who in white-bread middle-class America has a name like that? Teachers and kids look at you weird; people wonder if your parents made it up—not in a good way, either. And then, what do people give you for a nickname? *Mona*? What am I, trying to be a solo act in the eighties? *Dizzy*? Slightly cooler, but 90% because of too much *Starship Troopers* and *Digimon* growing up, let’s be honest. And then you read the play! And she’s really cool, but nothing like me. And I love her, but... I can’t *be* her, and that’s the point of names, and this is *dumb*. It’s a super classy, literary kind of *dumb*, but *dumb*.”

“Well, I don’t think—”

“Well, I’m going to interrupt you now, so sorry if that causes problems with your itinerary but *Othello* is my play,” said another woman in the circle. She wore a similar suit jacket to the group leader though the six-inch stilettos and department-store-makeup-counter perfect eye makeup cut quite a different figure.

“Hello, ladies—my name is Bianca, and I am named after a prostitute in a Shakespearean play.”

In another group, that line might have had a bit more of the punch the woman seemed to be expecting.

“No one in my family was thinking of Shakespeare when I was born—I was either going to be Bianca or Belinda because all my siblings and I have ‘B’ names, and Belinda was vetoed because of my Grandmother’s intense phobia and hatred of snakes. I got my Bachelor’s in psychology, primarily out of a desire to declare every single person in my family mentally unstable. I saw the university’s production of *Othello* for a paper, and I was enthralled with the concept of Bianca from the moment I read the program and saw the rude lesbian from my Gender and Sexuality class was going to be playing a character with my name.

“So I watched the play, and I liked certain things more in theory than in practice. In theory, I liked Bianca for being outside the destructive marriage dynamics of the play. But then she wanted to be married to Cassio and wasn’t completely liberated at any point.”

“And then I read about a Bianca in *Taming of the Shrew*, who held an inverted reaction for me—at first the precious ingénue, who at the end of the play tells her husband not to put too

much stock in her obedience..."

During her lecture of self-discovery, Bianca missed Portia and Desdemona passing notes, Beatrice updating her photo blog and Ophelia receiving a notification of the update, and Viola texting behind the cuff of her bomber jacket.

"...And what I determined was to take from these characters what suited me, a sharpening to my own natural personality traits and a measure of balance—"

"Well, that's great," Portia said, standing, lifting her bag. "But Dizzy and I have a class to get to. Unexpectedly. Semester-long class that has never been scheduled just now before. Unexpectedly."

"But I was just getting to my Master's thesis project—" Bianca began to protest as they made for the door. It fell closed behind them on another incomplete sentence.

"Always a pleasure sharing wasted time with you, my dear," said Portia as they reached the top of the stairs where they would part.

"It's not that bad," said Desdemona. "Besides, everyone knows it's more for Miss Lavinia than it is for us."

"Yeah," said Portia as she started away. "Let none of us ever imagine we have it as bad as Lavinia."

Manic Pixie Dream Girls and Insert Café

Victoria Murray

“I’m going to offer you some advice, purely out of your own better interests, okay?”

There was a chair on the other side of her café table, a chair she didn’t since, with a plate and a pastry, her computer, her charging phone, the neoprene sleeve for her laptop, her bundled cardigan, and her drink, there wasn’t room at the tiny table for anything else. The café bred a practiced atmosphere of being welcoming—warm brown tones, tasteful art by local artists, efficient merchandise displays, flirty baristas joking with anyone not wearing headphones—perfect for the level intimacy that its patrons wanted.

The girl at the table wanted no more intimacy than to be in a room with people. Honestly, wasn’t the effort of that enough? It involved putting pants on, after all, and isn’t that the universal barrier in between perfectly casual and Involves Others activities?

“You see, the problem is that you’re an obvious author proxy,” the person continued. The person happened to be a he. “He” happened to be putting her phone on top of her cardigan on top of her neoprene sleeve to make room for his coffee and a place to rest his arm for significant posing. The *he* appeared to be about her age, and he hadn’t happened to stop talking while she narrated him in her mind.

“What?” she said when she caught up with herself.

“A self-insert character for the author, obviously,” he said. “Really—” he winced, “it’s a bad move, really the worst way to start any kind of story, being a stand-in for the writer. Ahem.” He sipped his drink and looked around, like they had reached a pause in an ongoing conversation.

“What?”

“I mean, they get a lot of flak in the media, but nowadays you’re probably best off going with a Manic Pixie Dream Girl if you’re going to be the heroine of a story.”

“What?”

“Yeah,” he continued. “And, I mean, it’s not like Manic Pixie Dream Girls even *deserve* half the flak they get just for be-

ing who they are, y'know?"

"Um..." She had been starting to say "what" again, but he interrupted her.

"Oh, you don't know what a Manic Pixie Dream Girl is? Okay, well, I was assuming you would because you're obviously a writer girl tapping away at your little laptop in a coffee shop sitting alone. That is, my assumption was that you as a character would be self-aware enough, that is, genre-savvy enough to understand what story roles are in a general sense, and that then applying the concepts to yourself wouldn't be terribly difficult."

"What?"

Look, there's no need to get snippy!" he said, raising his hands to show he was unarmed, his face maintaining an affronted expression. "It's just a really bad way to start a story, by being written in exactly the way the writer is, y'know?

Shows no creativity, *at all*. So what I'm saying is: Manic Pixie Dream Girl. You'll get to have so. Much more fun, you'll get to really bring about change on the part of the hero, and there's so much diversity among MPDGs these days that it's not a character limitation at all."

She heard the period after the "so" in his voice because she couldn't find any other emphasis mark for it—bolding was forceful, italics were drawn out, underlining gauche, while the period lent some finality for her to dwell on while he hadn't yet stopped talking.

"We're *out* of the age of introspective, self-absorbed writer types sitting in coffee shops and thinking more than they're feeling. What you *need* to do these days is *feel* everything—feel every single blissful, horrible, heartrending emotion to its n^{th} degree, make your choices to protect yourself, and make *connections* with other people, very selective connections mind you, since you're protecting yourself, and very few of even those connections get past your defenses to the real you underneath, and we uncover what it is that makes you so emotional and what trauma it is that makes you keep everyone else at bay while putting on your manic pixie face.

You'll bring brightness and beauty and something truly remarkable into the lives of those around you, and whether you burn hot and bright like a firework or wither beautifully like a hot pink Valentine's rose, everyone will remember you and love you when you're gone.

"So, that's why you should be a Manic Pixie Dream Girl

instead of such an obvious author-insert, sitting pretentiously at a café table alone, writing and thinking. It's just... bad storytelling."

He crossed his arms, stayed that way for a full beat and a half, and then reached for his coffee cup and sipped again.

"What the he-"

"Also no cursing; it's off-putting to many audience members, and it's stupid to think that it ever heightens the quality of writing. Really, it's just sloppy storytelling that shows a writer doesn't have enough grasp of character, craft, and emotion to get the same message across without resorting to stupid curses."

"Oh my gosh, are you going to shut up? Really? I mean, *actually*, really? Listen, dudebro, I'm just sitting here marathon-ing a show on my laptop because internet is crap at the dorms, okay?" she wanted to say, but didn't.

She wanted to continue from that springboard, and she wanted to rail against the nature of men writing self-insert Every-man versions of themselves for every man playing opposite manic pixie dream girls.

She wanted to have an equally elegant speech decrying condemnation of author-inserts and replacing a figure that at least had some measure of real humanity behind the character, replacing the character with tropes bearing as little originality in its destructively idealized image existing to flash, crash, and burn or wither away depending on which sort of death would be poetically appropriate for her supporting cast.

She wanted to, but the situation was already ridiculous enough, so she mumbled something about having somewhere to be, packed her things, and walked away.

Blood and Gummy Worms

Sarrah Strickland

Gummy worms. That's what his mom packed for him. The bus was crowded, full of squirming kindergarteners with their box lunches and knapsacks. The smell of peanut butter, grape jelly, and cheese crackers wafted through the enclosed bus as the warm vehicle jostled the twenty-five children and seven chaperones inside.

Sitting mostly two to a seat, almost every child's gaze was fixed on the ongoing traffic, watching in awe at the passing cars and trucks that drifted alongside the school's christened vehicle. Many cars seemed to cower before the mighty bus' power, and the only automobile that stood any chance of conquering the rickety school bus was the occasional big rig that would pass so close to the bus that many of the children imaged they could extend their outstretched fingers and graze the cool exterior of the aggressive trucks.

As the aged orange school bus carefully navigated the exit ramp leaving the highway, the children eagerly looked out the window in the hopes of catching a glimpse of a benevolent truck driver who would be willing to honk his rig's horn. One little boy, however, was too preoccupied with his snack to notice the heavy traffic that was beginning to coagulate on the road. Gummy worms.

Whenever he went on a trip, that's what his mom packed for him. It was his favorite snack and always made him think of home. As long as he had gummy worms, he could face any fear and confront any challenge. Gummy worms made him brave. Gummy worms were magic.

He sat quietly in his seat staring at the Ziploc bag he held in his lap. One of his hands firmly grasped the small bag while the other was picking among the contents, counting out his treasure.

After a few minutes, he concluded that he had 10 worms. Enough to make it to the dairy farm, but not home again. He would have to savor them. He carefully selected a red and green worm from the unsealed bag and lifted it hesitantly to his lips. He would allow himself one small bite. Any more than that and he might not be able to control himself.

The bus jerked, and the boy's dark bangs fell across his

eyes. His mom had been saying all week that he was due for a haircut. He hoped that gummy worms would be involved. After the bus' lurch, he looked down at the bag in his lap and panicked. Six of the worms had fallen out of the plastic prison and lay sprawled across the edge of his seat. He carefully placed his bag of treats on the seat and used his left hand to rescue one worm at a time, returning them back into the bag, all the while protectively grasping his slightly nibbled red and green worm in his right hand.

Unfortunately, he wasn't quick enough though, and four of the six fell to their uneaten deaths. Doomed to lie in the bus aisle, melting from the engine's incessant heat and bludgeoned forcibly by various forms of child-sized footwear.

With every bump and jolt that the bus encountered on the road, his little fist grasped the small bag tighter still to fend off the potential onslaught of fear that was brooding in his stomach. He wouldn't have enough now.

Unaware of the daunting tragedy the boy had experienced, the bus steadily slowed to a crawl as more tractors and rigs began to congest the two-lane road. The students chattered happily, and the adults murmured on in conversation as the bus driver's foot inched further and further down on the brake pedal. To the children's delight, and a few of the acrophobic chaperones' chagrin, the bus rolled to a stop on the bridge overlooking Shoals River.

The county was pretty reliable when it came to maintaining their roads and overpasses, but bridges were often overlooked by building committees, who wished to spend their money and efforts on projects closer to home. Out in the sticks, roads, bridges, and everything else manmade, had to be used until it broke. Only then would the county be bothered to send out construction crews.

This particular bridge was assumed to be one of the oldest bridges in the state, and based on the creaks and amounts of sawdust that were released when pressure was applied, locals tended to believe this assumption. It was a risk to travel over the bridge, but when cars and especially large vehicles approached the river, they proceeded with caution and drove two at a time across the bridge. One coming, one going. There was never any hurry on the Shoal's River Bridge.

The school bus steadily crept across the worn, faded wooden planks that created the ancient structure. Many of the

adults half-heartedly warned the children not to wiggle around too much. It was a safety precaution that had turned into a habit, for as threatening as the bridge appeared, no serious accidents had ever occurred over the Shoal's River.

An oncoming car eased past the school bus as the bridge's only occupants crept past each other out of cautious courtesy. There was a small line of tractor-trailers that had accumulated on either end of the bridge, but these drivers knew how to be patient, cranking up their radios and repositioning themselves in their seats to wait for their turn to cross, all except for the driver of the rusty tractor-trailer who was next in line in the oncoming lane.

The boy stared down at his feet. He had one gummy worm left. As piously and cautiously as he had tried, he could not contain that boyish hunger that children feel when confronted with a treat. There was only one: a half gnawed, slightly sticky worm. He sat rigidly in his seat holding the worm in the palm of one hand and caressing it lovingly with the other. How long could he savor it?

Within moments of the oncoming car leaving the bridge, the rusty tractor-trailer, brimming with freshly cut cedar logs, inched forward onto the wooden planks, eager to cross and be on its way. As the bus neared the end of the bridge, the tractor-trailer eased the weight of its entire load onto the bridge. In a matter of seconds, reality changed for twenty-five children, seven chaperones, and two drivers.

The heavy creaking of an overburdened, 50-year-old wooden bridge; the high-pitched shrieks of a busload of terrified children; the low moan of a helpless bus driver as he realizes what's about to happen; the sharp intake of breath by several similarly enlightened chaperones; and the confused cries of a tractor-trailer driver as his rig and a busload of screaming children began to slip off of the left side of the bridge.

In those few seconds that it took for the bridge to fail, there was panic, terror, chaos, tears, screams, and in the midst of all this madness, one little boy sat huddled against the window inhaling the artificial fruity scent of his gummy worm. All the magic that he had left.

As the bus fell, his half-eaten worm didn't save him. Nothing could save the bus, or the trailer, from the 125-foot plunge into Shoals River.

The water rushed into the cracked windows of the sinking

bus. Flailing children cried as the water quickly rose around them. The bus was going down fast. The driver was unconscious, and the chaperone seated nearest to him was diligently tugging on the door release, but to no avail. Within minutes the bus was submerged. Not one man, woman, or child survived that day. But, in his final moments, among the sound of splintering wood, wailing classmates, shattering glass, and rushing water, the boy had his worm. There was no blood, only gummy worms. And he was brave.

Tree of Life

Anna Parker

The tea spun slowly, and the steam rose above it, dancing in the brisk morning air; its smooth circular motion mesmerized Gary in the early hours of the morning. The sun had yet to rise, and the only light in the kitchen came from the bulb that hung above the sink. It illuminated the small room and exposed all of the memories that he held. His wife had decorated this kitchen; his wife of fifty-six years had labored over every detail of this house. Three small tin cans lined the counter and let him know where to find flour, sugar, and tea. The stove held nothing but a teakettle that had tarnished in the past few months. It sat on the back burner, a faint whistling cry still emitting through the hole. The light flickered. It reminded him of the hospital—the fluorescent glare that cast an ominous glow over his entire life. It was a light he knew all to well. It had shone as he watched those he loved die, helpless to save them. His wife had died under the twitching glare of the light—the light that illuminated a scene he so desperately wanted to forget.

He was an old man of seventy-eight, and his body showed it. His hair was still full, but it had lost the brown shade of its youth; hair the color of snow had taken its place. His hands were wrinkled and worn. They showed signs of a life full of labor and yet were still tender to the touch. The construction business had taken its toll in some ways physically; he was more prone to aches and pains. But it had been good to him. Despite the labor, his build had stayed the same. Tall—over six feet—he was as sturdy as ever. His thick waistline still held him upright, and he was still able to hike every day—something he hoped he would never lose.

Above the sink and below the bulb on the wall hung a small circular clock. Gary knew the time without having to look at it. 5:07. Every morning before the sun came up he would rise and make tea—decaffeinated earl grey tea with one packet of sugar and a little bit of cream. Every morning he carried the steaming cup upstairs to his study—setting it down on the large oak desk next to his maps. His maps were now his most treasured possession. He spent hours turning them over and over again, contemplating where he would go for the day. It had become a ritual for

him and his wife. They would rise and share breakfast together. She would prepare their packs and meals for the day while he mulled over what path to take. It was their life, and they loved it. There was something about the ritual that held so much certainty and so much promise. They had a direction; they knew where they were going. And the mountains and their trails were there to confirm it morning after morning.

He stepped out onto his porch and beheld the most beautiful view—the mountains outlined by the faint beams of the rising sun. They were something that helped mark the passage of time. The trees stand; their leaves are ever changing. The small green leaves with blossoms springing to life, the bright hunter green leaves solidifying life and strength, the red and orange leaves signifying the coming change—from them comes life and rebirth. But then there is the bareness. The dark, dull, grey-brown limbs that become exposed and are filled with death; they hold nothing, not even a promise or sign of anything good. It was winter when his wife died.

Gary sat in the airport. Ann's head rested against his shoulder. Her eyes were closed, as she tried to get some rest before their doctor's appointment. It was an unexpected trip. Ann had become more fatigued in the last few days, and she seemed to not be doing as well. He tried to keep his shoulders from hunching and his back from leaning forward. "It's going to be okay," she reminded him. She could feel the tension in his shoulders.

He observed people passing by—everyone rushing this way and that with their luggage. It was the life he wanted so desperately to avoid—the fast-paced constant movement with no time or place to rest. Gary had never wanted that life, and yet here he was right in the middle of it. He would never be a part of it though. As soon as they were finished with this visit, they would be home in their quiet, serene mountain. An older man walked by pushing a cart full of luggage. Gary glanced down at their two small unchecked bags. They had enough baggage to carry. The less they added the better. He adjusted his shoulder trying not to disturb Ann.

He sat beside her as she grimaced in pain. Her chest rose and fell as she breathed short, shallow breaths. Her fingers loosely intertwined with his. There was little strength in the grasp, and he held her even more tightly.

They had called for the nurse ten minutes ago and she still wasn't there. Leaning forward, he kissed Ann's forehead and whispered, "I'm going to find a nurse. I'll be right back." Her head leaned forward off the pillow ever so slightly—her way of saying okay.

Gary walked down the hall towards the nurses' station under the garish light that illuminated empty beds and unrecognizable machines. It was a separate life of his—one filled with pain and sadness and the unknown. He wanted his other life back. The one with just the two of them. No doctors, no nurses, no foreign objects poking and probing Ann as he sat by and watched helplessly. He wanted his quiet life back with Ann well again.

Leaning over the counter, Gary found a young woman sitting at the desk entering information into a computer. "Excuse me," he said, trying to hide his frustration. "My wife is in 413, and we were wondering if we could get something to help her with the pain." The nurse looked at him blankly and turned to the phone. "Sure," she responded. "Someone will be there shortly."

Walking back to the room, Gary pushed open the door and resumed his seat next to Ann's bed. He picked her hand up and again wove his fingers through hers. He rested his head on the side of the rail and whispered, "Someone will be here soon." He gazed at her face—a face that had lost the little color that it had had. "Ann?" He squeezed her hand. The short and quick pace of her chest had stopped. The hand that was once warm was now cold. "Ann," he said breathlessly. She was gone. She had slipped away from him in those few moments he was absent. Silently, without a word of complaint or sadness or reassurance, she had left. No goodbye, no I love you—even though those had been said countless times. She left nothing for him to hold onto except for a foreign world—a foreign world where she was now absent.

The park was silent at seven in the morning save for a few early risers trying to get in a run or a walk before continuing their daily life of work and meals and friends and family. Their lives continued without a drop of disturbance to ripple and resonate

and destroy it. Ann had wanted to walk through this park after the appointment before they returned home.

The bench's cold metal seeped through his jeans, numbing his body but not his emotions. His emotions had numbed days ago. The memories of the last few days rushed over him—signing papers, meeting with person after person who offered their condolences. Condolence is such hollow, meaningless word. It is what people say when they have nothing else to say because they have never experienced the stabbing pain of loss, not in this way. They stare blankly, unsure of how to deal with the silence and the agony that that emits in the space between. Condolence is a word offered to fill a silence that does not need to be filled because the world would always be mute. No matter what anyone said to him, his world was silenced, shattered.

He made his way down the trail. The sun rose behind him. He held his head partially up to enjoy the view and partially down to watch the path. He walked, letting his feet take him where they may. As he made his way down the steep slope, he stepped over a fallen tree. Its roots were torn from the ground, and its branches still bore the remnants of the leaves that used to fill it. As his feet carried him, he thought about the life he once had. His wife had been his rock, his foundation. Their life had been one adventure, and they had endured every journey together. And then they had received their biggest journey ever: cancer. He had watched the cancer eat away at her once strong body. He saw his rock erode away; he had no power to stop it. He had to watch her die.

He continued walking until he came to an open field. There were three large stones and five feet away was a small fire pit that a fellow wanderer built. Gary looked up at the sun and saw that it was getting close to five o'clock. He stopped, settled down on one of the stones, and pulled out an apple, a sandwich, and a water bottle. Pausing between bites, he looked around at the ever familiar field. To his left lay a fallen tree, and there, a little further off, was another fallen tree.

Gary paused with the sandwich halfway to his mouth. He let his arm fall, and his eyes wavered between the two trees. The more he stared, the more he noticed, and the more he noticed, the more he began to wonder. The trees were not dead. There was life springing up in and around them. Grass was returning; crea-

tures were making their homes there. These trees were dead; they had fallen and were completely cut down. Their lives—from their very roots—had been ripped from them. And yet life stilled existed. Even in death, there is life.

He tossed the remnants of his dinner back into his backpack. Maybe there was some comfort even in his wife's death. He didn't know what it was, but seeing life spring up after these trees had been uprooted held some sort of promise. He stood up to continue his hike. He had purpose now.

No longer did he let his feet carry him but his head and his heart; his memory would carry him. He turned and headed down a different trail. He had not gone down it since the fall; it was one of the last trails they had traversed together. He made his way to the top of the overlook and there—off to the side—stood a small stone marker.

This had been his wife's favorite spot. It was from this lookout that they would sit and talk about their hopes, their dreams, their life. He gazed out at the landscape, observing the endless rolling hills that stretched before him. The leaves were coming in—a pale green with buds coming up alongside of them. Life. The air held the promise of spring, a new beginning, and a new life. A small tear passed down his face. He let it fall and drip onto his shirt, as more followed. In some strange way, there was comfort in death. Gary didn't quite understand it just yet, but he could see it. He touched the place where his wife rested then turned and made his way back towards the trail. He walked facing the sun as it began to set.

The Balcony

Harrison Boatwright

One of the most exciting and startling things ever to happen at our church took place the Sunday before Easter, 1962. It involved one of the most rarely visited but completely essential places in our church: the sanctuary balcony.

The balcony sat directly above the last ground pew and held eight to ten slightly shorter pews. The balcony could only be reached by using a small staircase that could only be reached by using a small door in the back of the bridal room. No prominent members ever sat there, and the balcony was seen as so unimportant that its carpet and fabric were not even replaced when the church remodeled the sanctuary six years earlier. The one aspect of the balcony that made it absolutely essential to the church was that it held the larger and more powerful of the organ pipes. Some of these pipes reached two feet in diameter and were simply too large to be placed behind the organ chamber with the rest, so the balcony provided the ideal location for these pipes because, other than the occasional visitor or heathen who came only on Easter and Christmas, it was largely uninhabited.

The one exception to this rule was Spanky Perkins. Spanky was a tall, thin man with long arms and long fingers. The large nose on his face was outsized only by his gigantic feet. He wore an old suit his father had bought before the war with shoes that had soles so thin, he had to tread lightly over rough ground. He rarely shaved and the hair on his head sprouted in random, sandy-blond patches. He was known for loosing his tie, putting his feet up, and even sipping from a bag during the service although this was supposedly on the hush-hush.

Thus, he was the balcony's sole devoted occupant. Despite his obvious flaws, Spanky made very little impact and no trouble in the church until that faithful morning in April. Now, it just so happened that Spanky had been out too late the night before and had dosed off soon after the service started, leaving his bottle resting on his lap. He slept through most of the service and was awoken only by the deacons marching up the steps to collect the offering. In his haste to hide the evidence, Spanky tossed the bottle, uncorked, over his head into the back of the balcony. He had just enough time to straighten his tie and wipe the sleep from

his eyes before a deacon appeared at the door and held out the offering plate. Spanky dug into his pockets for loose change and found a fifty cent piece, a quarter, and two nickels, all of which he deposited in the plate. Then, realizing he had just chunked his morning's worth of liquor, he retrieved the fifty cent piece with which to buy another pint.

The deacon returned to the ground level, and Spanky began to feel quite crafty at the way he had avoided disaster with that well placed toss. But unbeknownst to Spanky, that well placed toss had sent his open liquor bottle sliding, neck down, into the largest and most powerful of the organ's pipes.

Spanky stood up with the rest of the congregation to sing the doxology, which is always sung after the offering is collected. No sooner had the organist bared down on her instrument than Spanky heard a gurgling sound behind him and, a split second later, the empty bottle and shine spewed from the mouth of the pipe like a geyser. The bottle barely missed Spanky's head, flew twenty-three yards forward and landed mid-pew on the seventeenth row, pulpit side.

This did little damage other than it smashed Bucky Williams' Altoids can and reduced his mints to powder. The real damage was done by the liquor itself, which turned into a mist that showered most of the sanctuary and stained poor Mrs. Eleanor's new white hat the distinct brown of corn liquor. The entire congregation stood up and chaos ensued until the Reverend raised his hands and said in a rather biblical tone "Be Still!"

The congregation was quietly dismissed and all the doors and windows were closed in a effort to keep the Presbyterians across the street from catching wind of the smell that literally seeped from the walls, floor, and ceiling of the sanctuary.

An emergency meeting of the deacons was called to decide what action they should take. The decision was unanimous: the remnants of that vile drink must not be allowed to ferment further in the fibers of the house of God and the carpet and pew cushions should be professionally shampooed.

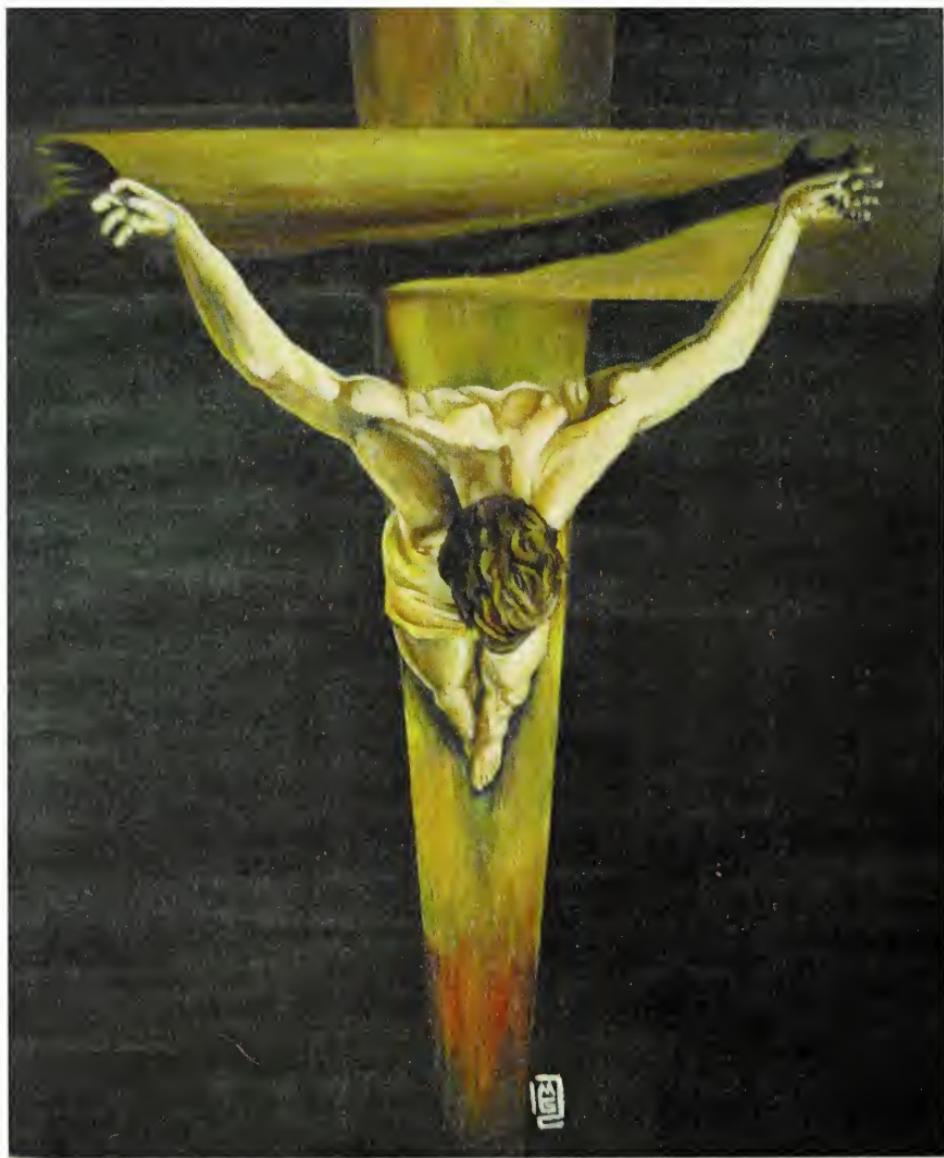
The only problem was that the funds were simply not there to undertake such a project. Of the offerings collected that day, half was to go to the overhead of the church, and the other half was to be used to purchase two fat hogs to be pit cooked for the Easter social the following Saturday. While all the deacons were quite fond of barbecue, the idea of the odor of corn liquor residing in the sanctuary of the Baptist Church for another

week was simply unimaginable. After much prayerful thought, the decision was made that the reverend should call the butcher and cancel the order for the two hogs, which would be replaced (free of charge) by two fat does that Matt Stevenson had shot that winter.

The Stanly Steamer was called and the church was cleaned. Although the reverend and the rest of us were not thrilled when the smell did not go away and the cleaners were forced to apply a cover sent of pink raspberry, this was better than the alternative.

After a few weeks everything returned to normal save two things: Spanky no longer sat in the balcony; overcome by the miracle that the vessel of his sin hadn't lifted his head from his shoulders, he was promptly re-baptized and from then on sat at the front row, taking careful notes of each sermon. The other difference was that the reverend never again preached from the seventh chapter of Luke. For most of the Bibles in our congregation, that single page was forever stained a light shade of brown.

Nonfiction



“Jesus” by Monique Gaboriau

The Art of Appreciating a Beautiful Soul

Tristina Miller

Jesus answered, “Even if I testify on my own behalf, my testimony is valid, for I know where I came from and where I am going. But you have no idea where I come from or where I am going. You judge by human standards; I pass judgment on no one.”

John 8: 14-15 (NIV)

Phone call

Me: Hello

It's my dad. I try to avoid talking to him. It's not that I don't love the guy, but he sure can be a "Debbie Downer."

Dad: Yeah, Nic?

He's always so awkward when he calls. He doesn't even say hi.

Me: Yeah? Hi, Dad.

So I say it.

Dad: That's a long sleeve shirt he has on right? That's not all tattoos right?

Here we go again. I know he's got to be talking about Randy. We already went over this; why can't he just be happy for me? I pretend I don't know what he's talking about.

Me: What are you talking about?

I try to sound like I'm confused. Randy's sitting right next to me, for Pete's sake.

Dad: This picture on your Facebook, that's not the guy you're dating, is it?

He talks so loud. I'd hate for Randy to hear my dad already judging him before he's even met him, so I get up and leave the room.

Me: Yes, Dad, that is him, and yes, those are tattoos. Not a shirt. I told you this when I told you about him. You knew. I didn't keep it from you so I don't know why you sound so surprised.

Now he's going to go into the way "real Christians" are supposed to behave.

Dad: Now, I thought you said this boy was a Christian. I just don't believe that he could be what or who you say he is by the way he looks and the music you say he sings and listens to. And he looks much older than you. That's a lot of tattoos! He knows

the body is a temple and still goes and marks himself up like that? Now Nic, *I'm not one to judge, but....*

Jesus taught that we must “Stop judging by mere appearances, and make a right judgment” (John 7:24 NIV). This has been the lesson of my life. Teaching it to my dad, however, may not be so easy.

My first serious boyfriend, however serious you can call a high school relationship, was with a boy named Lance. Lance was Mexican-American. He didn’t look Mexican other than his black hair and deep brown eyes. His fair complexion merely made him look like a white boy. I dated Lance for 4 years and my dad struggled with the fact that I was dating a *Mexican boy*. Dad would say to me, “Well, at least he looks like an American,” whatever that means. He never truly liked Lance at all during those 4 years. He even told me. “Glad that’s over, now I can stop worrying if he has his green card or not.” My relationship with Lance lasted a great deal of my teen years and then ended when I was 18, and in 2007, I began dating Kevin.

Kevin had what my dad considered American looks; tall, blonde hair, green eyes, perfect teeth, drove a nice truck, wore Abercrombie & Fitch and so forth. What Dad didn’t see was Kevin’s soul, or lack thereof. I was so convinced that because he had a nice package on the outside he must be good. He wasn’t. I guess Dad wasn’t the only one who was fooled.

Our first date consisted of parking by the lake and rolling up a joint. That is, after he had already downed three beers while driving. Our second date involved a little drug run. I was unaware of the drugs we were purchasing at the time, and I chose to look the other way—still blinded by his appearance. “They’re probably not for him,” I’d think, or “He’s got to make money somehow, and this just happens to be his way.” This behavior went on for six months or so, and I continued to date Kevin.

Oddly enough, my dad liked him and had no idea who he really was. I stayed with Kevin even though I felt there was something off about him. Was it because my dad approved? Perhaps. Dad didn’t care what time I came home or where we had been. He simply trusted me with Kevin because he was white and what most call “normal” looking. I had some freedom with Kevin... maybe a little too much.

The night that I realized that I was in denial about Kevin’s soul happened when we stopped by a house in the projects of my

hometown. We were on another one of his drug runs when a man in a black hoodie came up to the passenger side window and said, “You bring the money? I ain’t playing with you, man. I don’t sell to new people unless I know I can trust you, but Jordan says you a legit dude,” and then he looked at me and said, “Huh, who you got here?”

Quivering from the cold December air, I sat there and looked straight ahead out the windshield and just hoped and prayed that Kevin cared enough to say something.

“I bet I can get you a little discount if you throw her in...baby, there’s no coke that can make you feel as good as I can,” the hooded man badgered as though the drugs were for me.

Why am I here? I thought to myself. *Is this really me?* If my dad knew the truth...

The entire time I dated Kevin, I never had the urge to try any of the junk he had bought, and in that moment, sitting there being eye raped by a stranger, with my boyfriend buying cocaine, I was disgusted and thankful that I didn’t have to live this life and I was simply choosing to put myself through this nightmare. My dad would understand.

The strange hooded man began to reach into the truck for my arm, and Kevin finally spoke up, “Hey dude, we just want to do the trade and get out of here. I do appreciate your accepting of a new customer.” No protest for me or sense of protection for me at all from the “normal looking American boy.” The urge to vomit had never felt more prominent than it did at that moment.

The switch was made: money for rocks. It was up to me to hold onto the goods so I could toss them quickly if we ever got pulled over. And as he trusted me to help him out in an intense moment of jail time scare, I honestly didn’t know what Kevin was going to say or if he’d say anything at all. I did not trust him the way that he trusted me. What would he honestly have done had that guy tried to take me? I was placing my life in jeopardy and for what? ... We broke up a couple weeks after that.

I wish I could say that I learned to pick better guys, but I didn’t. My dad didn’t get any better at judging them either. He, like me, was still looking at the cover of the book, not the soul.

In August 2008, I began dating Ryan. Ryan was a roofer, went to the same community college as me, drove a nice black Dodge Ram, and came from a good wealthy family. He was 5.4’ with greenish/blue eyes, perfect teeth and listened to classic rock.

We had more than everything in common. I instantly fell for him, and in May of 2009 I moved in with him.

After dating Kevin, I told myself that I was done dating guys who did drugs, and I refused to go back to that life. Like Kevin, my dad also approved of Ryan. Ryan wasn't like Kevin, or at least he sure played a trick on me. Maybe I was just blinded. Because on our first date to the movies, he was taking shots of Jack from a bottle he had stashed under his driver's seat. I don't really understand why I continued to date him.

I tried to look past the few negatives and look at the positives. He and I had so much in common, and I was attracted to him. There I go with attraction again—the outer appearance. Girls stared at me with a look of envy when we were out, and I liked that.

Ryan was the first man that I ever lived with. So not only was I out of the watchful eye of my father, but I was about to be 21. His drinking habits were imbedded deeper into him than just a few shots before a movie. Shortly after moving in with Ryan, I found myself changing quickly to conform to the things he did and thought were cool. Apparently Ryan made a great deal of his money from selling weed. I began smoking, once every couple days or so at first, and then it escalated into all day every day. We were growing it, selling it, and smoking it. Then I began drinking. Not just a couple beers here and there. I was pounding a fifth of Jack Daniels every night and smoking. I even tried shrooms a couple of times and took Xanax just to feel nothing. But...I still looked like blonde innocent Nicole on the outside. I can't remember how many times I showed up at my dad's house stoned out of my mind. I had everyone fooled. It became fun to pretend. It's all about appearances right?

When I introduced Ryan to my family, I was always complimented on how nice his manners were and how I finally picked a good one. My older brother Mike always said, "He's cool, sis. Nice dude and doesn't look like a bum. He works and has a house. You did good." Ha! I was wrong. My brother was wrong.

I can't remember when I first noticed that Ryan's soul was disgusting and hateful, but I think it might have been when I asked him to start going to church with me. My friend Jennifer and I were tired of doing things on our own, and I was unhappy with the way my life was going and realized that I needed God or I knew that I needed "something." We searched through every religion possible at the time, just to say that we were open-minded when picking what we believe. "Go to God," that's what I

kept hearing from all my friends that I didn't hang with anymore because of Ryan. "God will help you through it, honey, just give it all to Him." I guess it didn't help that I picked the most controversial church there was, The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints, AKA "Mormon."

Handsome as Ryan was, he sure had a way of calling me every rotten name in the book and quickly became buried in alcoholism. He'd yell at me: "Get up, you creepy weirdo Mormon! You find Jesus and now you can't have any fun?"

He had woken me up a couple of nights by pouring his beer all over me in the bed because I wouldn't stay up and party with him the night before I had to work. When friends came over and he had been drinking, he wouldn't call me Nicole—my name was Mormon girl. "Hey Mormon girl, go get me a beer....Hey Mormon girl, show some cleavage every once in a while" he would snap at me. I couldn't take it anymore. I had to get out.

The trouble with judging people by their appearance is that there are not so good looking people out there with beautiful souls, and then there are the beautiful people who are embodiments of ugliness because of their lack of a soul.

My mom was a big help through the crisis known as "Operation Leave Ryan." She didn't approve of my church choice, but she knew I deserved better. I guess I felt like I could tell Mom the truth because I didn't want to face my dad. I just didn't want to hear anything he had to say. I didn't want to admit that I was wrong and then Dad would have to admit it too.

Mom offered me the chance to move to South Carolina and live with her. I could go to college and get a fresh start away from all of the drugs, alcohol and Ryan. It was probably the hardest decision I'd ever made: leaving my home and Ryan. Mom and I planned the whole thing behind his back. Somehow I knew he would be able to talk me into staying if I had told him my plan of leaving. The "idea" of us controlled me. We were cute together when we were sober. We laughed together when we were sober. But the few fun times we had were quickly erased when his true colors came out to play. So I left...

Thankfully I was able to rid myself of that lifestyle, move to a completely different atmosphere and dive into the world of Christian dating, that is, dating Christ believers. Christian boys were so different from Ryan. I stopped attending LDS and found a church that I truly belonged in.

Randy could not be a better match for me. The first night

we hung out he had me laughing until I was crying about some silly Jack-Sparrow-shooting-marshmallows-out-of-a-cannon-while-riding-a-clown-fish tattoo or something. I can't even remember because I laugh so much when I'm with him that all of my happy moments have completely wiped away the bad memories of the past. He has the sweetest smile and treats me like a princess. He has a heart full of love for God, which is what I so desperately needed.

My dad never really understood all the bad things that happened to me at Ryan's. Nor do I ever really want him to know who I became.

END OF PHONE CALL

He's still rambling on about how much God disapproves of tattoos and how metal music is Satanic and yada yada yada...

Dad: Well Nic, I just hope you know what you're doing. I'm not sure about this.

I want to say, I think I love him, Dad, but...I don't.

Me: Dad it's the best choice I've ever made.

And I know that it is. Randy is God-sent compared to Ryan.

Dad: Well, we will just have to see. Call me when you can talk about this.

You mean, "When I can badger you some more about morals, because I'm perfect and you could take a lesson from me"?

Me: Ok, Dad.

I hang up and walk back into the room with Randy.

I have begun to learn the way I should be viewing the people in my life. When you're a Christian, you are supposed to view everyone as children of God. God says to love others as you love yourself. You may not understand completely but being a follower of Christ opens your eyes to the beauty of the person's soul, not appearance.

So what I will say to my dad when I do decide to call him back is that what a person looks like on the outside is in no way a reflection of that person's soul and although the person I'm dating has tattoo sleeves, gauged out ears, and long hair like Jesus, he has the ability to make me laugh constantly and I've never seen a more beautiful soul.

Follow the Sign

Hannah “Andi” Jones

I didn’t notice it until I had left and was on my way back into town. The sign. There it was—tucked in a few yards from the tree line, waiting. I could make out an ever-so faintly darker blue square where they had taken down the icon, and now only the white lettering of “Attractions 199A” stared out of the expanse of blue. Now, the sign, a naked jay bird presents nothing but that empty, darker square. They hadn’t even bothered to take down the rest of the empty sign that remained.

I wondered about people just passing by: Can you imagine going to a new city, being excited the whole trip, only to come up to your exit and see “Attractions” with a blank expanse underneath?

My mother taught me the trick to these signs when I was girl. Back then, any time we went on a road trip—whether it was for a week or two, the weekend, or even just for the day—we would drive down the interstate and see what we could find. Usually, we ignored the green and blue signs unless they were pointing us toward our ultimate destination. We looked for brown signs or “tourist signs,” which pointed out very specific locations, and indicated a historical marker or point of interest of some sort—and the occasional blue “Attractions” sign.

Using this trick with the brown signs we discovered The Country Doctor Museum in Bailey, North Carolina (if you’re interested in old—and I mean old—school medicine practices); Ruby Falls in Chattanooga, Tennessee; and Table Rock, South Carolina; and so forth.

You’re probably asking yourself by now why I’m delighting you (you are delighted aren’t you?) with my interesting—albeit, slightly rambling—history with interstate signs. To answer this highly pertinent question (you attentive reader, you) I point you to, like some eerie ghost of recession not-so-distant-future, the empty sign I described: the “Attractions” sign for Summerville, SC, Exit 199A on I-26. The local would not even be able to see it when heading west toward Columbia, and might not even notice it when heading back east.

One might wonder why the sign of “Attractions” is still standing although, maybe even as I’m writing, it’s no longer

there. Perhaps the Highway Department has taken it down. This sign once had one icon on it—as opposed to the three of four on the gas sign, the completely full food sign and the two or three on the lodgings sign. No, this sign had one—the one my mother had seen—and that one icon was for the Woodlands Inn and Resort: Summerville's last “Attraction.”

The Woodlands Inn and Resort was the last of the great hotels in Summerville. In the early twentieth century, Summerville was a desired location for wealthy families people who believed that the trees and the elevation helped prevent malaria. In 1888, Summerville was named one of the two healthiest places in the world International Congress of Physicians in Paris. Those people who couldn't outright buy homes there rented rooms for a season from some of the grandest hotels in the country: Carolina Inn, The Squirrel Inn, White Gables, and Pine Forest Inn. The Woodlands Inn and Resort outlasted them all, until it closed last year.

The Woodlands, before September 17, 2012, was one of the few five diamond and five star inn and restaurants in the country. Even though I hadn't yet seen it, it was a magical place for me as a girl. My mother always described the inn, decorated for Christmas, as one of the most beautiful places she had ever seen. Live Christmas trees decorated every room with a grand tree in the corner of the dining room. The gleaming banister, always impeccably polished, was wrapped in a garland, and the whole place smelled like Christmas, a mixture of pine, cinnamon, and heavenly desserts baking. On the terrace an even bigger tree never had a bulb or ornament out of place. Mother Nature wouldn't dare make a light bulb flicker on the Woodland's Christmas tree.

When I was eighteen, I finally saw the Woodlands in person when my mother took me for my birthday: a grand plantation house, high on a hill—not unlike Tara from *Gone With the Wind*—with sweeping staircases, crystal chandeliers, and parlor rooms. Truly this was a wonderland, never mind Disney World or any other place children are told are magical. This was real.

A few years later, my mother and I went for Mother's Day, as my gift to her. Even though the Christmas decorations were all stowed away in their attic or storage rooms, that day the Woodland was everything we expected a five star restaurant to be: beautiful and absolutely delicious. The sad part is, I don't remember what I ate.

This year I had planned to take her for Christmas. This year, I had the money to take her to lunch at the most magical place either of us had ever seen. On that Mother's Day, I had no idea that Christmas visit never had a chance of happening. It would have been more likely that we would see snow that May afternoon. On September 17, 2012, the Woodlands Inn closed its doors.

It will never again be a five diamond resort. Never again a five star restaurant. Never again the most magical, beautiful, glamorous place. The new owner has planned to take this inn full of magic and beauty, where my fifty-eight year old mother and I could both be princesses for a few hours, and turn it into a retirement home. Its dining hall will probably have weekly bingo or bridge nights. The kitchen that once cooked gourmet meals for celebrities will now be serving tapioca pudding on a regular basis.

All that's left of what it once was is that sign. That blue, empty sign. Lingering. Mocking me. Reminding me that Summerville no longer has any attractions.



“Grandpa” by Monique Gaboriau

What the Medals Mean

Rachelle Rae

On a rainy day in January, we laid my Grandpa in the ground. They played taps and prayed prayers and doves soared into the sobbing sky. Grandma's gloved hands accepted a folded flag. I thought how cruel it was that they handed her star-speckled cloth when all she wanted—all we all wanted—was the man in the star-speckled suit.

Two days earlier, Grandma awakened to hear the air shudder through him. She tried CPR and begged him to stay, to *not do this to her now, Dick*, to just hold on...

When my alarm went off later that morning, I walked downstairs to find the television softly playing Fox News and Daddy coming out of the kitchen. I stopped in front of Mama's office door when his red-rimmed eyes confirmed all I didn't want to know.

"Your grandpa went to the hospital this morning, honey. He didn't... make it." It had been a long time since I had seen my father cry, but he cried then—the kind of crying daddies don't do in front of their daughters.

When Mama and Grandma came home from the hospital, Grandma sat at the table. She and Grandpa had gone to bed late the night before, she said. She had told him, "I wish I could stay up until midnight to wish you happy anniversary, but I'm not sure I can."

"That's all right," he answered. "There'll be time enough in the morning."

But the next morning, he went Home, and Grandma's tears glistened behind her glasses. "Who can say they've been married for forty-five years?" She smiled. "Who can say they've been married for *exactly* forty-five years?"

The next day, we went back to the red brick, teal-shuttered house with the lamppost out front that my brothers and I used to try to climb.

And we got out the boxes. Boxes of photographs, yellowed and tattered and loved. There was Grandpa as a little boy, grinning in the Pennsylvania snow, earmuffs snug against his face. There was Grandpa, with the black hair I never saw, graduating

from high school. I could see why Grandma fell for him when he, the Yankee boy, was stationed in the South and walked into her church, the church nearest the base. Yes, I could see why Grandma fell for him. There was Grandpa with his arm around Grandma on their wedding day. There he was sitting at a desk covered with machine parts and wires, wearing a white shirt and smiling at the camera as if he weren't in Vietnam.

When I needed a break, I walked to the corner of the den and stared at his hat on the wall, the one he wore while in the Air Force, that hangs next to the medals case. I remember asking him once, "Grandpa, what do all these medals mean?"

"Aww, now, you know, I don't remember. That was a long time ago."

At the viewing the room smelled like the flowers that spilled over vases and pots. The two TV screens played those pictures we had sifted: a continuous reel of Grandpa in the snow, Grandpa at graduation, Grandpa with his arm around Grandma's waist, Grandpa in the corner of the world that made America not believe in war anymore.

I watched the montage play, shook hands, hugged cousins I'd never met, listened to Grandpa's mother ask Grandma if he was really gone, her voice breaking with a mother's sorrow. It's not supposed to be that way. Mothers aren't supposed to bury their firstborn sons.

The next day I listened to the taps play and watched the doves soar. I stood shivering and watched Grandma's black gloves take the flag from the man in uniform. His face appeared as numb as mine. I stared at the exchange of star-speckled cloth for the man who once wore medals. "He came into my life," Grandma said about him once. "And he stayed. He didn't have to, but he stayed."

Then he was gone. As Daddy gripped Mama lest she fall and Grandma's hands clutched the flag, I thought back to that moment when his wide-eyed granddaughter asked Grandpa what the medals meant. Grandma's gloved fingers patted the folded flag. I flinched as they shot the blanks. *I understand now, Grandpa.*

Sixty-nine years of a life, of a loving life, of an imperfect life, whose soundtrack was both his favorite hymn, *Love Lifted Me*, and the laughter that tumbled him from the couch when the M*A*S*H episode proved it really was *soot, sir, just soot*. That is what the medals mean. My blood pulses red, white, and blue,

even when I watch the news of a war I don't understand. My hand rises to cover my heart when the national anthem plays. My smile wobbles when a flag flaps in the wind, and I remember the folded one that sits on Grandma's bookshelf right next to the wall where his hat and medals hang.

Honor, valor, courage, bravery, sacrifice—he taught me all of those without his ever having to form the words. My grandpa traveled down the turnpike, past the Mason-Dixon to meet and marry his love in that church near the base. My grandpa threw his mattress over himself when they shelled his barracks in Vietnam on the night before he was to come home to Grandma and their girls. My grandpa always had an undying love of country even though serving that country amid Agent Orange took his life.

The medals mean the legacy that lives on in those of us who knew him, who knew his gruffness, who knew his taciturn ways, who knew his tears when something moved him. That is what the medals mean.

Mantha

Amanda Evans

20 Things She Loved

1. Purses with lots of pockets
2. Flips that flop and shades
3. Candles that smelled like men
4. Sinatra
5. Boyce Avenue and Green River Ordinance—for their attractive and talented lead singers
6. Mixed CD's made with no thematic or genre-specific reasoning
7. Books on CD – especially Peter Pan
8. Jane Austen – most every version that's ever come out
9. Doctor Who
10. Supernatural – for Jared Padalecki and Jensen Ackles
11. Gilmore Girls – again Jared Padalecki
12. Chocolove – chocolate bars wrapped in love letters
13. Earl Grey tea
14. Rain storms
15. Taking pictures – especially of Downtown Charleston
16. James Island
17. Diving and sailing
18. Her little blue Focus and the many take-out boxes, soda cans, paperbacks and hair bands that littered its floor-boards
19. Her portable, expensive Mac
20. Her literary role-playing games

Setting: Otranto Road Regional Library, the Children's Section
Zoom in on two young ladies. One is sitting at the librarian's desk, typing on the dinosaur of a computer. The other is sitting on a stool beside a cart of books, alphabetizing the fiction and numerically organizing the nonfiction.

Mantha (the girl at the desk): Psst.

Me (the girl on the stool): *Looks up from her cart. Not noticing anyone, she returns to her work.*

Mantha: *In an aggravated whisper* Amanda.

Me: *Looks up at Mantha with embarrassment in her eyes.

Whispers* Sorry.

Mantha: Here. Read this. *Passes me a few printed pages.*
Me: *Takes the pages and reads them behind the fortress of the cart of books.*

Mantha: *Pretends to do scheduling work on the computer while actually IM-ing her friends, Mary and Erica.*

Me: *After a few minutes* So... you play Dee?

Mantha: *Sighs softly* Yes. And Allie plays Cosmo, her brother.

Me: *Hands back the papers.* That was really sad. That's their backstory, right? How their parents died and they found out?

Mantha: Yep. Allie and I love the evil plots! *Clapping her hands softly* We love the misery and the feels! (The feels = That instance when you are at a loss for words at how simultaneously sad you are for a character and yet either happy for them too or impressed by the author's talent.)

Me: I can see that. Don't you like happy endings? You're the one who is all about Jane Austen and her fairy-tale endings.

Mantha: Books and movies need happy endings most of the time. It gives people hope. But writing, this RP, it's about making the characters real. Real life usually doesn't have happy endings.

“Somewhere beyond the sea
She's there watchin' for me
If I could fly like birds on high

Then straight to her arms I'd go sailin'.”

~ Frank Sinatra, “Somewhere Beyond the Sea”

Setting: Yokoso, Japanese Steak House next door to the Library

Two young ladies sit at a table with two middle aged couples.

Me: I'm so hungry I could eat a zebra.

Mantha: All right, Simba, but why don't you try edamame first?

Me: Ed-i-who-hah?

Mantha: Edamame, it's steamed beans. Trust me. You'll love it.

The girls order their food, including an appetizer of

edamame.

Mantha: *Leaning over to whisper in my ear* Our waiter looks like Patrick Swayze. The sideburns, it's like Patrick Swayze circa *Dirty Dancing*.

Me: *Sneaks a peek at the waiter the next time he walks by* Oh my God, you're right. *Giggles.*

Mantha: I know, right? *Giggles.*

Me: That's creepy. I wonder how many people ask him if they're related.

Mantha: Probably not many. They're probably too scared he'll take it as an insult to that hair of his.

Me: *Stifles a laugh as the waiter walks by*

“Those who bring sunshine to the lives of others
cannot keep it from themselves.”

~James Barrie, *Peter Pan*

The last memory I have of her, we were eating dinner another night. Due to the flooding downtown, the Main Branch closed all of the Charleston County libraries early, so Mantha and I got off at 5 instead of 6 and 8, respectively. Neither of us had plans, so she suggested that we grab a bite to eat. We drove around for a few, trying to decide where to eat, and eventually settled on the Food Court at the mall for its variety of options. With her ranch chicken sandwich and my Chinese noodles and chicken, we settled at a table to eat and talk, mostly about the RPG but also about school.

“For what is a man, what has he got?
If not himself, then he has naught

To say the things he truly feels and not the words of one who
kneels

The record shows I took the blows and did it my way!”
~ Frank Sinatra, “My Way”

Mantha dropped me off at work, so I could get my car, and we could go our separate ways – me to my dorm and her to the Tanger Outlets to pick up her friend Kevin. We said our good-

byes as we got in our cars. I told her I would see her online later that night and at work the next morning. She had convinced me to join her RPG, and there was event in the RPG's town that night. This meant all of the writers would be in a chat room, writing as their characters interact at the event. I waved to her from my car, already thinking of ideas for my characters.

“Never say goodbye
because goodbye means going away
and going away means forgetting.”
~ James Barrie, *Peter Pan*

Private Messages in the RPG's Chat Room

We are signed in as our characters, so anything we type in the chat room is considered in character. If we want to plot out how characters will interact or talk to our friends who play other characters, we do it through private messages or p.m.'s.

Nick: We need to talk. It's urgent.

Laurel: Um... Ok. Shoot. What's so urgent?

Nick: No, we need to talk on the phone, not p.m.'s.

Laurel: I don't give out my number to people I don't know. Sorry. But I'm more than willing to email you.

Nick: Amanda! It's me. Erica.

Laurel: Oh! I'm sorry, hon. I didn't know you added Nick to your ever-growing list of characters.

Nick: It's ok. Can I call?

Laurel: Sorry, but no. I wish you could, but I lost my phone last weekend when Mantha and I ate at IHOP with Kevin. I left it there, and it got stolen.

Nick: Video chat then?

Laurel: Um... yeah. Sure. I look like crap, but okay.

Nick: So do I.

Video Chat Dialogue

Actions in asterisks.

Me: Hey! *I realize that Erica looks like death warmed over and that she isn't smiling back. Her hair (nicknamed Precious) is curling everywhere, trying to escape the bun she forced it into.

Her mascara is smeared under her eyes. Her face is pale, but her eyes are red.* So... what's up?

Erica: Honey, I have to tell you something.

Me: *I lose my chipper mood* Okay.

Erica: Honey, Mantha died today.

Me: *I just sit there. Later, I realize I was in shock.*

Erica: She was driving and it was flooding and she ran off the road. She hydroplaned and hit a tree.

Me: Oh, my God... *I cover my mouth with my hand.*

Erica: Yeah. Umm... *She tucks her hair behind her ear as she thinks of what to say.* I don't know any of the plans yet. I know her mom will be putting up info on any kind of service, but I don't know when that'll be yet. Umm... Yeah. That's really all I know.

Me: I can't believe it.

Erica: Me either.

Me: So what are we gonna do?

Erica: I don't know. You know, I really don't know. We'll get together and think about what to do with the RPG – I mean, it was her baby – and her characters – no one else can play those. They were so much a part of her. I don't want to think about it. We'll figure that out later.

Me: Have you told everyone on the RPG?

Erica: Not yet. I mean, I told the other admins. They were all video chatting with me when I got the call. Mary and Nat Nat and Lynn all got to see my not-so-pretty cry. But they are the only ones who know. I'll post something later to tell everyone.

Me: But you'll be coming down soon then?

Erica: Yeah, I'll be down tomorrow, and I'll stay with Mary until everything gets worked out.

Me: Okay.

My face loses any expression it had before. What about Kevin?

Erica: Yeah, I'll tell him too. *Not getting it.*

Me: *I lean closer to my laptop, suddenly very upset.* No, hon. She was on her way to pick him up from work. Someone has to tell him soon.

Erica: *Her eyes get that deer-in-the-headlights look.* Crap! Okay. I'll go call him now. Oh my God. He's... Oh, he's never going to forgive himself for this. I bet you he's going to blame himself...

Me: Oh, I know I would. He shouldn't, but he probably will. Well, you go call him. I'll try to stay near my laptop so you can reach

me, and I'll see you when you get down here.

Erica: Okay. Bye, honey. I love you.

Me: Love you, too, Erica. Drive safe.

Erica: I will.

Call ends

I spent the next hour or two crying hysterically in my car parked in the school parking lot so no one could see my not-so-pretty cry. I eventually went back to my room and cried myself to sleep.

She never even made it to Tanger. You never think that a passing, not-so-special goodbye will be your last. If you knew, you would do it right. Not, "I'll see you later," but the heartfelt kind—the kind where you thank them for all they've done for you. I would have thanked Mantha for introducing me to good entertainment – Gilmore Girls and their witty banter, BBC, The Reduced Shakespeare Company and their hilarious antics, Boyce Avenue, Green River Ordinance, and Doctor Who so I would understand Tardis references . . . I would have thanked her for all of the sound advice she gave me. Mostly I would have thanked her for being such a thoughtful friend, for her crazy spur of the moment trips, and for her quirky phrases. I wish I would've thanked her more and more often, but that chance is gone. Instead, I will cherish her memory, ceremonially indulge in Mantha Movie Marathons, and continue writing in her RPG.



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